



这个电影

我穿过

你穿越到古代最想做什么？

穿越到古代最想做什么？

梦圆楼下 (作品)

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I've Transmigrated Into This Movie Before

xiujunzhen

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Summary

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Description

- Question: "What is scarier than the personal experience of transmigrating into a horror movie?"

Anonymous: "Transmigrating into a movie you've never seen before."

- "Poor comment! There's nothing scary about that!"

Anonymous reply: "You sure? Can you be sure your dad isn't a murderer? Can you be certain your spouse isn't out to kill you for insurance money? Can you even be certain there isn't any hidden lethal weapon in your son's lunchbox? The scariest thing is that you have never seen this movie before so, you have absolutely no idea of any 'surprise' that awaits you ahead!"

Hence, this novel is also called ['surprise' that awaits you].

(Source: Novel Updates) (Disclaimer: Story not mine) (Translation from Chapter 1-11 is from Meraki Translations) (Chapter 12 onwards is from icecreamcake : victim)

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 – Movie Empress’s daughter

What’s scarier than the experience of watching a bad movie? Watching your own bad movie.

An expressionless Ning Ning sat in a movie theater, surrounded by roars of laughter, when a neighbouring audience member nudged her with their elbow, “When did you become blind?”

“I’m not blind.” Ning Ning pushed up her sunglasses. She wore a pair of sunglasses not due to blindness, but because she was afraid people would recognise her as the female lead in the movie.

“Hrm, I’ve already gone blind.” The neighbouring audience member took off their eyeglasses and slowly cleaned its lense, “My vision started declining after 5 minutes of watching the movie, and I’m almost a hundred percent blind by now.”

“Ha, haha...” Ning Ning laughed awkwardly, at a loss for words. Thinking, *Why hasn’t this darned movie finished running.*

At the moment, the movie was actually already halfway finished, and those audience members who cherished their eyesight had more or less left. Of those remaining, they were either scrolling through their phone, chatting, or sleeping. Only Ning Ning’s neighbour was watching the movie seriously. He persistently fixed his gaze onto the screen, though nearly blind, “How many star ratings do you think this movie can get on IMDB?”

Unable to keep her conscience from giving it a full star, Ning Ning said, “3 stars.”

“2.5 stars.” Her neighbouring audience chortled, “2 stars for the plot and 0.5 stars for the main leads.”

“What?” Ning Ning could not remain calm anymore, and she turned her head towards her neighbour, “How can the main leads be blamed for a bad movie? Even a movie empress wouldn’t be able to save such a retarded plot and dumb script!”

“What do you think actors are for? They are there to change something rotten into something magical, to make a 2 star movie be rated 3 stars.” Her neighbour’s gaze remained fixated on the screen. In the darkness, only a rough outline of his side face could be seen, as

well as the movie's reflection on his glasses lense, "There's only so many good films and only a few good acting roles– the majority of actors got started with bad films. So an actor doesn't need to put in any effort just because the film is bad?"

The movie ended. Accompanying the melodic flow of the ending song, the lights began to go up in the theatre, also lighting up the man's side profile. It was the Great director, Chen Guanchao.

As he turned his head and smiled, Ning Ning's heart sank because she had already guessed the purpose behind his visit to watch the movie and knew his next words.

"Your mum is a great actor." Chen Guanchao got up and walked past her, leaving behind words of regret, "What a pity, you aren't."

He left, and the other audiences left too, leaving behind a vacant movie theatre. Only Ning Ning still sat, unmoving like a statue.

A phone ringtone abruptly sounded. She fished out her phone and saw a message sent by her manager, which said, "You don't have to go to the audition next month anymore. Director Chen just phoned the higher-ups specifying he will not use you."

Ning Ning's phone weakly slipped out of her hand, as she faced the running credits with the actors names slowly moving up the screen then disappearing – like the ebbing tide, washing away old names one after the other and replacing them with new. Of the many names, how many are remembered by people, how many had been forgotten. How many had people praised in admiration, and how many had been shown disdain.

"<I Am a Big Beauty> has stayed at rock bottom since its opening, box office numbers are not expected to even reach 3 million."

"Curse of the second generation of stars! Formally legendary movie empress's daughter is bound to not amount to much!"

"Shocking revelation! Ning Ning reveals in private: As long as it pays, I'll shoot any film!"

In the span of a night, critics overwhelmed her. Standing within the midst of criticism, Ning Ning arrived at the hospital. Slowly, she pushed open the door of the ward, and saw her mother lying on her side in bed with a phone placed beside her pillow. It was currently playing the bad movie in which she was the lead actress <I Am a Big Beauty>.

"Ah, Mummy." Ning Ning sighed whilst walking over and kneeling

down beside the bed. Leaning her forehead against her mother's hand, she softly said, "I'm sorry, don't watch it anymore."

Sorry, I shouldn't have picked this bad film.

Yet if she had not done so, she would not have sufficient money for her mum's hospital bills.

In the past, she had still held on to some hope that she could be like her mum – shining like the moon and oh so eye-catching despite starring in a bad movie. But the facts proved she had overestimated herself. Legends are one because they are hard to come by– she had only inherited her mum's face, not her talent.

"I'm sorry." Ning Ning could not hold back her overflowing tears, "I'm sorry mummy, I have no talent..."

"Who says you have no talent?" Ning Yuren laughed, "You are exactly like me, exactly the same, look."

As Ning Ning lifted up her head, reddened eyes could be seen. Following Ning Yuren's hand, she saw herself with wide opened eyes filled with anger on the phone's screen, rushing towards the male lead and shouting like an enraged bear, "Why won't you look at me when I am so pretty! Look at me! Look at me!"

Ning Ning shut her eyes in dismay, speaking with a shaky voice, "Mummy, can we not look at this anymore? I feel like I am going to puke."

"I was the same when I acted in my first movie, worst yet, I splattered the male lead with a whole face of saliva." Ning Yuren watched in enjoyment, "The male lead then refused to continue acting, saying how he wanted to open an umbrella whenever he saw me."

"Then what happened?" Ning Ning asked.

Ning Yuren slightly rolled her shoulders to relax them. "Then I got replaced."

Ning Ning looked at Ning Yuren in shock, unable to believe that the legendary movie empress had such a history. Because before Ning Yuren was given the title 'Legendary Movie Empress', she had another title – inborn actor. Countless great directors have named Ning Yuren as an actor who was the most talented– no matter if she was playing the role of an imperial concubine, a village girl, a cunning spy, a passionate singer, or even a male. She could be immersed into her role, so much so that no one could tell the slightest difference from

the real thing.

No, as a matter of fact, it could not even be described as there not being the slightest difference.

In the last movie she acted in before retiring, a war movie on spies directed by Chen Guanchao, he praised her during the press conference, "There will never be another actor greater than Ning Yuren. If I were to play a clip of another actor's scene, you would be able to tell that they were acting, even if the scene was played repeatedly. But if I played one of hers, you would only think that it was part of a documentary no matter how many times you saw it."

In comparison, what is this thing acted by Ning Ning?

"Nevermind mummy, don't console me anymore." Ning Ning said dejectedly, "It's clear as day what I am made of now that the film is out. Director Chen even went out of his way to give me a call..."

She paused mid-sentence, not wanting to continue on but Ning Yuren pressed on warmly, "What did he say?"

"... He advised me to leave this industry." Ning Ning said in a sour tone, "that my films are not just tormenting the audience but also myself, that they are only good enough at supplying the netizens with the latest gossip."

"Oh." Ning Yuren scoffed, "He's a load of shit."

A bout of dizziness overcame Ning Ning, "Mummy, isn't it bad to speak of your fanboy that way?"

Ning Yuren, "He was the male lead back then that **die die** wanted me replaced."

Ning Ning, "..."

Who knew the great director had such a history!

"Actors are lonesome." Ning Yuren's smile vanished as she looked at Ning Ning in seriousness. Reflected in Ning Ning's eyes was no longer the most beautiful eastern woman, but a bag of bones. Because of the torment of a terminal illness, Ning Yuren's hair had all fallen away as had her meat, leaving behind a thin layer of skin wrapping over her bones, "Audiences are like the crashing waves that gush towards you, then leave like the receding tides. What will stay with you through it all is only your acting."

"But I don't have..." Without waiting for Ning Ning to finish speaking, Ning Yuren pulled her arm over abruptly before placing in

her hand the thing that she had prepared beforehand.

A movie ticket.

Ning Ning looked down at the palm of her hand– it was a movie ticket that looked decades old. A thin piece of yellowed paper that had a round stamp on the left side with the words ‘entrance ticket’ written on it. On the right, there was a rectangle which said ‘Life Movie Theater’ and below that, 8th row, 45.

“At midnight, go to this movie theatre at 35 Rouge Street to watch a movie.” Ning Yuren added, “Alone.”

However, she regretted it the next moment and snatched back the ticket, “No, I think you’d better not go.”

“Mummy...” Ning Ning looked at her puzzledly, “Is something the matter?”

Ning Yuren looked at her with mixed emotions, only speaking after a long time, “Ning Ning, do you really want to become an actor like me?”

Ning Ning, “Of course I do.”

Ning Yuren, “How much do you want to?”

“How do you want me to describe it?” Ning Ning furrowed her eyebrows.

“In this lifetime, you will never touch any other meat besides boiled chicken breast.” Ning Yuren said unhurriedly.

Ning Ning who liked skewered meat, could not help looking pained for a moment, before saying resolutely, “I can.”

Ning Yuren, “Even if your wife is about to go into labour, you must still finish acting first.”

Ning Ning, “I am a female.”

“Alright fine,” Ning Yuren kindly rephrased herself, “Even if your husband is about to go into labour, you must put acting first.”

“...I can’t do it.” Ning Ning answered awkwardly, “At such a time, I have to be by my husband and child’s side.”

Ning Yuren, “Don’t be silly, how can a man give birth.”

Ning Ning, “...”

“Final question.” Ning Yuren made a short pause, looking at her,

“Will you give up on acting?”

The media’s overwhelming criticism, Chen Guanchao’s late night call, the cursing from Weibo, the gossiping in the agency...

Scene after scene of memories flashed across Ning Ning’s mind, making her need to shut her eyes momentarily for a short escape from reality, before she opened them again with difficulty, “I will never ever give up on acting.”

Ning Yuren’s face lit up with a smile, one that would topple countries and continents. In a split moment, the beauty that had once led countless people to fall head over heels for, had once again returned.

“Go there then.” She handed the movie ticket over to Ning Ning once again, and shut her heavy eyelids as she showed a look of remembrance, “At that place, I once changed my fate. It, too, can change yours...”

Ning Yuren’s voice ceased.

“Mu...mmy? Mummy!”

On November 11th, 2016, at 9 p.m., the Legendary Movie Empress Ms. Ning Yuren passed away due to cancer, living to the age of 52.

Uncommon terms:

Movie empress- 影后(ying hou) a.k.a an actress who has won the best female lead award.

Happy Valentine’s Day! An edited version of chapter 1 is finally released! Thanks for your patient wait C: There will be chapter 2 and 3 coming right up.

Noted: ITITMB was moved from Ruisitranslations to Merakitranslations

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely

Thanks for reading~

Chapter 2

Chapter 2- Two Transactions

Many came to the funeral. There were famous stars and great directors, which then led to the arrival of obscure celebrities, as well as the reporters that were chasing after their footsteps. Very quickly, this funeral turned into a socializing party.

"Isn't this strange? She didn't have this many friends while living, and yet now that she's dead, there are so many more." A familiar voice rang out behind Ning Ning.

Without having to turn around, she knew the owner of the voice.

Chen Guanchao walked to a few steps behind her before bending down to place a white chrysanthemum onto the coffin.

"You turned her into an exhibition." He straightened his back from its previous bending position, and turned to face her with a smile.

Ning Ning's lips moved wordlessly, unable to think of any words of rebuttal because he was right. Someone who was sincerely here to attend their friend's funeral would never bring along selfie sticks and reporters.

"Oh right," Chen Guanchao said, "I heard a rumor recently."

"A rumor?" Ning Ning asked.

"I heard that you are going to auction your mother's belongings," He stared hawk-eyed at her, "including her trophies and underwear."

Ning Ning looked at him wide-eyed in disbelief, "Why would I do something like that?"

"You better not do so." Chen Guanchao paused momentarily as if he was contemplating something, before continuing finally, "You can come for an audition next week. Although the female lead has already been decided, the supporting role is still undecided."

If he had told Ning Ning this news in the beginning, she would have been happy beyond words. However, hearing it now only made her feel humiliated and upset because it felt too much like charity.

"This is not charity." He answered as if he could see her thoughts, a scornful smile on his face. "This is a transaction, to put it simply, you

keep your mother's dignity and I give you a chance."

Ning Ning stared at him before appearing as if she wanted to speak but was interrupted by her phone ringing. She furrowed her eyebrows at the incalling number, before hurriedly rushing off to the lounge after saying a few words of "apologies" to Chen Guanchao.

"What are you saying?" In the lounge, Ning Ning was simmering in anger, "Mom only just left and you already want to auction her belongings?"

In a luxury store in Hong Kong, an old granny in a leopard print leather coat was currently trying on diamond rings, while a shop attendant held up a phone to her ear. She replied unhurriedly as she admired the shining glimmer on her fingers, "I don't have enough allowance."

Ning Ning took few deep breaths, "How much do you want?"

"Give me 1 million for now," Old granny said.

"I just gave you 1 hundred thousand last month and you are asking me for 1 million now?" exclaimed Ning Ning.

"In her younger days, your mom would give me whatever amount I wanted when I asked." The old granny replied coldly, "She's great in all ways except for giving birth to an ungrateful brat like you. I'm only asking you for some allowance and you are giving me this poor attitude. Are you out to piss off your maternal grandmother?"

Ha! To think someone like her exists in this world!

Who in the industry doesn't know that everything about Ning Yuren is great, except for having a blood sucking vampire-like mom like Cui Hongmei. As a movie empress of a generation, why would she not have any money left for her own medical expenses? Where did it all go? It all went into Cui Hongmei's luxury leather coats, diamond rings and villas.

"I have no money!" Ning Ning is not as good-tempered like her mom was, "It all went to buy mom's burial plot at the cemetery!"

"Well that's fine." Cui Hongmei couldn't care less, "see you at the auction place."

Then, she hung up while snorting at her phone, "hmpf, you're years too early to argue with me."

When the phone rang again, an attendant looked at Cui Hongmei, who waved her hands. "Don't bother with her, let her continue calling."

What other designs do you still have, bring them all for me to try."

On the other side of the phone, Ning Ning raged after her tenth consecutive call went unanswered and her patience had run thin, "Old thief!"

As Cui Hongmei might really stay true to her threat, Ning Ning had to contact the funeral celebrant to end the ceremony quickly, and at the same time, ready an airplane ticket to stop her grandmother.

Thus, the funeral started out of good-intention had ended hastily.

Guests slowly shuffled out of the venue with soft murmurs of complaints. Inside a Bentley, a tall handsome man suddenly spoke, "Dad, don't you think you were too harsh?"

"What are you trying to imply?" When Chen Guanchao sat down beside him, the driver shut the car door.

The handsome man – Chen Guanchao's son Chen Shuanghe said bluntly, "You have not even the slightest intention on letting her act in your production. By telling her to come for an audition, you only want her to realize the gap she has between me and other people, then use scene after scene of 'cut' to crush her."

"You think this is harsh?" Chen Guanchao laughed, "It will be an irresponsibility towards the audience, as well as an insult to actors if I am to allow her to continue in this industry."

"Really?" Chen Shuanghe gave him a long side glance, saying, without holding back, "All I see is a fanboy being irrational."

Chen Guanchao was stunned for a moment, before rebutting uncomfortably, "Who are you calling a fanboy!"

"There are so many people that lack acting skills, yet you are only picking on her." Chen Shuanghe said bluntly again, "Isn't it only because, in your eyes, she is a stain on Ning Yuren?"

He stared at him coldly once he finished speaking. This man cried a whole three days at home upon receiving the news of Ning Yuren's death, as if his own wife had died. No, when his true wife actually died, he didn't even shed a single tear, nor did he even attend her funeral. When I called him crying, he only replied indifferently, "Wait till I'm done filming." In the end, when he finally came back home, mom had long been turned into an earthen jar of bone ash.

Chen Shuanghe ceased his thoughts, turning to look out the car window. Not too far away, a gloomy looking Ning Ning, in a hurried manner, walked past while carrying the earthen jar filled with bone

ash. That lone back view bore an uncanny resemblance to him back then. Chen Shuanghe looked at her with complicated emotions, finding her appearance resentful in one moment, and pitiful the next.

In the next moment, the car started moving.

The grey Bentley drove past Ning Ning. Not knowing why, she stopped in her footsteps and turned to glance at him. The two lines of sight met rapidly and left each other just as quickly. Now that his surging emotions were gradually settling down, he could clearly feel more resent. Chen Shuanghe turned his head back around, thinking, The next time we meet, crush her.

Ning Ning didn't take that momentary glance to heart. After the funeral ended, she was originally supposed to be busy settling issues regarding the cemetery but Granny Cui made her do a complete one-eighty on her plans. Without a choice, she had to temporarily leave her mom's ashes at home and rush to Hong Kong at her fastest speed...

Welcoming her was a contract.

The contract was placed on the coffee table between Ning Ning and Cui Hongmei who sat opposite one another. The atmosphere was tense.

"Do you know what you are doing?" Ning Ning stated coldly, "You are selling your granddaughter for a cheap price."

"No, I think the price is very fair." Cui Hongmei sat on a european-styled sofa with legs crossed. Compared to last month, there was now a new huge diamond ring on her finger, "Besides investing in your film career and related movie advertising, Mr. Yang is willing to give me 5 hundred thousand as a monthly allowance. This is beneficial to both you and me."

Ning Ning slightly leaned forward to stare at her, "In your heart, I'm only worth this 5 hundred thousand monthly allowance?"

"If you had a talent like your mom's, of course I wouldn't have to do this." Cui Hongmei took a drag of her cigarette, a puff of smoke then shrouded her face momentarily, " But do you? Just how long do you think your fresh little pretty face will remain fresh for?"

Ning Ning slowly curled up the fingers placed on her knee. There had always been people putting her down. But, this was the first time she had been hurt this deeply because this was her relative who had entirely disregarded everything about her. Except her physical appearance.

"Right now... I'm indeed no match for mommy." Ning Ning pressed her lips together, "but I've always worked hard..."

"Forget it." Cui Hongmei cut her off, "Yuren only took two years to become widely famous, but you? You've already been acting on tv for years."

Ning Ning felt indignant and ashamed, she wanted to refute these words with the reasons that times had changed, there were too many actors, audiences preferred looks over acting skills... But all these were mere excuses because in the end, it was all because she wasn't good enough. If she had her mom's good looks and acting skills, she would not have to be standing here now.

But at least Cui Hongmei should not be presenting her with such a humiliating contract.

This is just like a knife carving on her heart– *you're useless, you have shit acting skills, you're only good enough to be a chairman's mistress after all you've put in.*

"What if I say no?" Ning Ning asked coldly.

Cui Hongmei leaned back on the sofa, her red lips blood-like and a cigarette held between her fingers, "I already know you have no conscience, but that's fine, I've already contacted an action house. From my initial estimation– those trophies, dancing clothes, underwear, small items etc– added up together will at least bring me 7 to 8 hundred thousand. Barely enough for an old woman like me to live my remaining years."

... People might call me unfilial, but if heaven had an event right now, a grandmother to exchange for a mom, I would burn this old woman to death right away!

"I won't be signing this contract." In front of Cui Hongmei's eyes, Ning Ning picked up the contract and tore it to pieces, "you should spend less time trying to scare me. There's a part of the inheritance for you and as for me, just your part alone isn't enough to sell for 8 hundred thousand."

"You are deliberately trying to anger me to death! *cough, cough*" Cui Hongmei beat her chest in fits of coughs.

Ning Ning did not believe she would die when she was just on a date yesterday with a muscular man, in which she then posted a picture of kissing him on her wechat status.

"Let me give you another option." Ning Ning took out a pen and a

notebook from her bag, then threw them on the table, "list out all the belongings, and we split half/half. You mark your half with a reasonable price, and I'll buy them back one by one in future after I've earned enough money."

Cui Hongmei immediately stopped her coughing fit, snatched up the pen and wrote with fleeting speed in the notebook.

Once the list was done, Ning Ning looked through it. An astronomical amount, especially for personal items like underwear, was set at a high price of hundred thousand per item.

Ning Ning was clear that the most advantageous way to obtain these belongings was to let her auction them, because Ning Yuren was not currently a popular celebrity, afterall, and her underwear would not auction for a high price. However, she did not want to do so. *Mummy can't lose her honor.*

She could only clench her teeth and say, "Fine."

At this moment, Cui Hongmei was finally satisfied, and facing Ning Ning's leaving back view, she urged, "You better be quick, I've plans for a vacation to Hawaii next month. Can't be empty-handed then."

I know! You said it in your status that you'll be going on a honeymoon with your muscular man!

Ning Ning's footsteps faltered for a moment, before leaving quickly.

Ning Ning boarded the plane hurriedly, then got off the plane hurriedly. In the taxi leaving the airport, Ning Ning continuously called and messaged people, begging for jobs – any job is fine, any role is fine, she needed to earn money.

However, influenced by her previous horribly-bashed movie, everyone saw her as box office poison, thus avoiding her like the plague. Her manager called when he got the news, warning her, "If you want to continue in this industry, don't say things like 'any job is fine, any role is fine' just lay low for now."

Although her manager's words were very strict, truthfully speaking, they were all for the well-being of Ning Ning and she herself was aware of this fact. But right now, what she needed was not a well-meaning warning but comforting; even a short "are you okay" would have been fine. However, as a golden manager*, Li Boyue was extremely busy. He has numerous stars under him, and though Ning Ning was one of them, she was not the most important one.

After hanging up, Ning Ning attempted to search for a friend she

could open up to among her contacts, when in the end, discovered she only had contact information of work partners. There was no one to even lend her a shoulder to cry on.

In order to become a qualified actor, she had practically sacrificed everything.

She had no friends, no entertainment, no hobby. Only years after years, days after days, of practice and more practice.

So much sacrificed, yet there were no benefits to be reaped at all.

The tears that Ning Ning had held back for a few days finally came gushing down her cheeks. She looked at her image reflected on her phone screen, and could not resist choking up, "Why must you be born into this world when you have no merits ..."

She covered her mouth crying uncontrollably, while outside the taxi, rain pelted down. Suddenly, in the midst of the rainwater, an old outdated signboard flashed past.

"Stop here!"

The car pulled on its brakes on the side of the road, and Ning Ning opened the car doors and got out. Without an umbrella, she stood in the unrelenting downpour and looked at the movie theater opposite to where she was standing.

Life Movie Theater.

Uncommon terms:

golden manager* – 金牌经纪人(jīn pái jīng jì rén) the highest grade of managers, title given to managers with high capability. (Resources, connections, etc.) Basically ability to bring their celebrity to stardom.

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely

Thanks for reading~

Chapter 3

Chapter 3- Life Movie Theatre

The Sun goes down early in winter, but adding the bout of rain left the world in almost darkness.

This left the movie theatre in front of her the only light in the darkness.

It was narrow, situated between two walls. There was a wooden door that only allowed the passage of one at any given time, and two stringed rows of lanterns hanging at both sides of the doorway, lit up with a warm orange light while swaying in the windy rain. Old as it was, even the poster on the wall seemed as if it had been there since the seventies as its different coloured words were slightly blurred. It was a very memorable place. Called Life Movie Theatre, it sat at the intersection of Rogue street – the place that Ning Yuren was reminded of on her deathbed.

Ning Ning walked towards it, but was stopped on her path by someone.

It was a man, who wore a white mask and was dressed like a thug of Jianghu* from the olden days – a long white chinese-style robe with a black-cotton belt around his waist, and a pair of black cloth shoes on his feet. His voice sounded low and muffled through the mask, "It is not time yet."

"Look," Ning Ning lifted her palms up as the rain pelted down on them, "the rain is pouring down so hard, can you at least let me buy a ticket and wait inside?"

He shook his head.

Ning Ning then tried to persuade him, but was repeatedly rejected.

To think such a damnable place and guard exists! Ning Ning was itching to immediately give this place a negative review on the net. She turned around lividly, waving her arm for a taxi.

The taxi quickly drove her away, then once again drove her back to Rouge Street.

Ning Ning got out of the taxi and walked to stand before the gatekeeper, "Is it time now?"

The gatekeeper replied calmly, "5 more minutes."

Ning Ning looked down at her wrist watch, 23:55.

She could not help but be reminded of the words her mom told her before leaving, "At midnight, go to the movie theater at 35 Rogue Street to watch a movie, alone."

Midnight indeed, not a minute more, nor a minute less.

Ning Ning raised her handbag over her head as a makeshift umbrella as the rain gradually grew more intense. She walked around the area before the entrance, feeling like a moron.

"Entrance ticket." The gatekeeper spoke in his signature calm voice.

Ning Ning searched busily for a moment before finally finding and pulling out an old movie ticket from her handbag. It was a thin piece of yellowed paper that had a round stamp on the left side with the words 'entrance ticket' written on it, a rectangle which said 'Life Movie Theater' on the right, and below that, 8th row, 45.

The gatekeeper seemed to be surprised with her being able to pull out a ticket, giving her a rare second glance. Then, looked down to tear the ticket and moved away from the wooden door behind him, "One person one ticket, invalid upon admission."

Finally entering. Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief, and before passing through the door, turned her head to take a glance at the movie poster.

An old poster. As if a remnant from the seventies or eighties, it was brightly coloured like an oil painting. Perhaps due to the wash by the rainwater, its colour and wordings were slightly blurred. The poster featured both a good-looking leading actor and actress, however, they were unfamiliar faces to Ning Ning who only just knew their names after reading the names of the cast.

Movie Title: <Republic* Circus>

Main Leads: Chen Junyan, Li Xiulan.

"Never heard of them." Ning Ning mumbled to herself then turned around and went through the entrance.

Unlike the worn-out exterior, the interior was unexpectedly neat.

Rows of carved wooden chairs sat in the middle, making it seem like a play theatre from the Republic days. However, up front was not a stage with crimson red curtains, but a white cinema screen.

"Your seat is here, miss." A staff member – a young maiden in a flower petal decorated cheongsam, escorted Ning Ning to the seat. She had a soft voice and similarly wore a mask on her face, though not a boring white like the gatekeeper's. Instead, the mask was in the style of a beaming court lady with red lips from the olden days.

Ning Ning sat down and surveyed her surroundings. Everyone around her wore masks– even the auntie sweeping the floor was wearing a crying mask.

"Why do all of you wear masks?" Ning Ning asked as she warmed her hands with the hot drink given to her by the young maiden in the cheongsam.

The young maiden replied while beaming, "All staff members have to wear masks."

Finally, Ning Ning realized the reason behind the strange feeling she had had since entering. When she looked around, there were only staffs wearing masks in sight and she was the only one without a mask– the only customer.

I know it's a midnight show, but does it have to be this cold and quiet here?

Right when she wanted to ask 'are there no other customers?', the auntie sweeping suddenly straightened her back from its previous slight bend and walked towards the door. The other staff also gradually stopped whatever they were doing and started walking out. It's as if they had heard a bell only audible to them.

This situation bore an uncanny resemblance to escaping during a fire alarm so much so that Ning Ning could not help but to stand up and ask, "Where are you all going?"

The group of people stopped in their footsteps and turned their heads back in unison.

A crying mask, monkey mask, scholar mask... various masks stared at her. Behind the court lady of the olden days mask, the voice of the young maiden in cheongsam rung out, "The movie is about to begin, please enjoy yourself."

Ning Ning had more to say, but suddenly, all the lights went out. Around three seconds later, the screen in the distance lit up, a shining bit of light in the darkness.

"I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid." Ning Ning tried hypnotizing herself by chanting as she sat down and sipped on the straw of the hot

beverage to try to calm her nerves.

The screen was a blank white for quite a while, before, very slowly, a row of words came into view.

"This film is based on a true story."

Following those words was a male voice unhurriedly singing, "Kidnapped kids are made to pick a wooden man. Whoever picks a lame, will have their legs broken; picks the blind, will be blinded; picks the amputee, we cut their limbs. Then, as beggars, they'll beg for money."

Beads of sweat trickled down Ning Ning's head.

She sat unmoving in the seat with only her eyeball moving around anxiously.

Not that she did not want to move, but because she became unable to since this man started speaking.

She struggled with all her might to part her lips and let out a cry for help, but yet, she could not produce a single sound. On the contrary, the other sounds increased gradually in volume, the man's voice, a woman's voice, traveled from a distance to close by. Ning Ning could slowly make out the voice that was shouting by her head, "Wake up, wake up, wake up..."

"Ning er, wake up!"

Ning Ning abruptly blinked her eyes.

Finally, she could move, but was too frightened to do so.

Finally, she could speak, but did not know what to say.

Before her were three people, three unfamiliar faces.

One of them was an old physician in a white gown, who had a grey beard, and was currently using two fingers to pull apart her eyelids. Another one was a middle aged woman dressed like a maid during the Republic times. Presently, she held her hands, palms together, and was reciting 'Bodhisattva' incessantly. The last one was a man in his thirties, who had a thin and refined face with a moustache on his upper lips that resembled whiskers. His hair and clothes seemed like they had gone without a wash for days, while his red eyes showed that he had not also slept for days. His tears were flowing out as he grasped onto her hand, "Ning er, don't sleep anymore, don't give papa a fright."

Ning Ning looked at her hand held in his, a small white and thin

hand, in his huge bronze coloured one.

The screen paused on the two hands as the camera shot slowly pulled away to a distance. In the movie theatre with not a soul in sight, there was only a cup of a hot beverage, its final steam rising quietly, placed where Ning Ning previously sat.

Outside the entrance, rainwater flowed from the roof and hit the ground, *pitter patter, pitter patter*. The gatekeeper slowly turned his head, looking towards the poster on the wall.

After the main leads' names, an ink dot suddenly appeared on the spot where there was previously only a blank space. Then slowly, as if there was an invisible brush writing, there was a stroke and a line. A new name had been added to the poster.

Movie Title: <Republic Circus>

Main Leads: Chen Junyan, Li Xiulan, Ning Ning.

Uncommon terms:

Jianghu – A community for martial artists, which in some ways (a martial world?)

Republic – In direct translation of 民国 (mínguó) which is short form for Republic of China. Used to describe the Republic of China period 民国时期 mínguó shíqí (1912 – 1949)

As for the court lady mask I was envisioning something like this.

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely

Thanks for reading~

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 – Republic Beauty

1915, daytime.

In the red-light district, Willow Lane was quiet at the moment, and not much was going on. The main door of Slumbering Flower Hall was opened, but it wasn't for attracting customers. A pimp* yawned as he strolled out from within. He bought two servings of soy milk and youtiao* at a breakfast stall, and then had them sent to Maiden Li's room along with a wash basin filled up with water.

The copper basin filled with steaming water was placed on a small table. A small comb, typically used by a woman, was dipped into the water before moving back to its spot before the mirror.

Two faces were reflected in the mirror. The person sitting in the chair was Boss Qu, while the one standing next to him and serving him was Maiden Li.

The two parts of the mustache were finally tamed, as they stuck tidily above Boss Qu's lips after Maiden Li combed them. Satisfied, he touched his mustache and said, "This is good, now Ning'er will be able to recognise me."

Maiden Li laughed, "My, you're talking as if Ning'er only recognises your mustache."

"If she could recognize my mustache, since I've been gone for two years, that would already be pretty good. " When he thought of his daughter who looked at him like he was a stranger, Boss Qu could not help but sigh. He turned to her and asked, "Where are the things I told you to buy? Did you get them?"

"I have them here." Maiden Li pulled open the drawer, displaying item after item: a silver pearl hairpin, Peony Pavilion's make-up rouge box, one bottle of the Two Sisters brand perfume...And then finally, she retrieved a pair of silver bracelets and shook her head at him. "The others aren't worth much. On the other hand, these bracelets took me a great deal of effort before I could get it for you. Master Zhang of Qingyun doesn't normally make accessories for others. You've no idea how much pillow talk I had to give him before he would accept. Look at this, the fine workmanship makes it good enough to be the most valuable item in a wealthy young woman's dowry."

"You women know what's best to buy." Boss Qu took the bracelets contentedly and glanced over it again, before bending down to pull a briefcase out from under the table. As he opened it, he nudged his chin at her, signaling that she could take some of its contents.

Maiden Li swallowed her saliva, slowly reaching in and greedily grabbing a handful. Her palm was filled with lustrous silver when she pulled her hand back out.

"Just how much money is stored in that briefcase?"

When Maiden Li told her mahjong playing buddies the next day about what had happened, they could not help but ask.

"How would I know?" Maiden Li pinched a mahjong tile in her fingers, and replied absent-mindedly, "But I reckon it would be enough to reserve our entire Slumbering Flower Hall for a whole month."

They let out gasps of astonishment. One said enviously, "With such a rich customer, you won't have any worries for the rest of your life."

"What rich customer? He's nothing but a daughter obsessed maniac." Maiden Li sneered, "When you speak to him, at least 80% of the time he's talking about his daughter. He says his daughter is some fairy from heaven, a rich and grandiose flower in the mortal realm. I can't even compare to her finger."

"Is she really that pretty?" One asked.

"As if anyone's seen her before." Maiden Li played the tile in her hand, "All I know is that she has been sickly and weak since birth. Since she was three, she has never left her house. Bet she has bound feet*... I win!"

The mahjong table was bustling with noise. One held a tile and asked, "But speaking of which, you really brought him a pair of bracelets from Qingyun?"

—

An imitation!

Ning Ning clenched the bracelets in her hand. Across from her, Boss Qu was still rattling on, "Qingyun's Master Zhang doesn't make accessories for just anyone. I only got him to make them after asking an acquaintance of mine. How are they? Are they pretty? Do you like them?"

Who would like an imitation...?

In Ning Yuren's lifetime, she had filmed lots of Republic films. There was a longtime fan of hers infatuated with those films and thus, gifted her a complete set of silver adornments from the Republican period that happened to also be made by Qingyun. Though after Cui Hongmei borrowed those accessories, Ning Ning never saw them again.

However, after Ning Ning had already experienced the real deal, how could she not see that these were a fake? Ning Ning could guarantee that Boss Qu had definitely been scammed by his acquaintance! However, she could not tell him the truth as she was currently a young girl who had never left home and could not even tell a chicken apart from a duck. Thus, she could only go against her conscience and say, "Mm, they're pretty good."

"Come, let dad help you put them on." Boss Qu quickly clasped the pair of bracelets onto her wrists, then smiled, "They're so pretty. My Ning'er is the most beautiful girl in the world."

Ning Ning lifted up her right and left wrists and took a look, feeling that her social status had been lowered significantly by these imitations. Thus, she replied dispiritedly, "Though I know you're lying, thank you nevertheless."

Boss Qu was stunned for a moment before turning around and shouting, "Wang ma!"

"Master." The family's middle aged maid hastened over.

Boss Qu spoke coldly, "Say it. How do you see young miss?"

"Young miss is a Qing dynasty princess, a fairy that fell from heaven, and a noble flower in the mortal realm." Wang ma looked at the ground. As if reciting from a menu, she had memorized a huge string of phrases. "Young miss is the most beautiful girl in the world and no one compares. "

Ning Ning said, "... Stop, I'm about to puke."

"Why do you want to throw up?" Boss Qu pressed Ning Ning's forehead with his palm, "Do you not feel well again? Should I call Physician Wang over?"

A sudden thought arose in Ning Ning.

When she had first transmigrated here, she had been planning on faking amnesia in order to save herself some trouble but there was no way Boss Qu would accept this! He wiped the tears streaming down his face, turned around, and then pointed at Physician Wang's head.

“Cure her! I want to hear her call me papa!”

Henceforth, Physician Wang lived together with Ning Ning in the abyss of suffering. In half a month’s time, Physician Wang lost the last of his beard, while Ning Ning was treated with acupuncture, herbal medicine, and suction cups. Eventually, at her wits’ end, Ning Ning shouted, “Papa!”

From then on, Ning Ning would feel frightened whenever she saw Boss Qu. The moment his gaze fell on her, she would automatically play the role of his daughter Qu Ning’er!

To an actress, this wouldn’t be too difficult, right?... As if!

She always had a script on hand for her previous roles. What she should say and do would always be written clearly. What’s more, she was not required to accomplish everything that was on the script. There would be a stunt double for flying in the air to flee, and a body double for writing and drawing. Like a majority of actors, Ning Ning resembled an actor from a production line* more and more, as someone who was relatively important but replaceable.

But now, without a script or a double or anyone telling her what to do, she had to figure out who she had to play. Ning Ning gave Boss Qu a glance, thinking that it didn’t matter who *she* was, but right now she had to figure out who the person in front of her was.

Therefore, she slapped the other person’s hand away. “Don’t bother me!”

Boss Qu didn’t get angry, and instead asked her in a soft voice, “What’s wrong, who made you unhappy?”

“You!” Ning Ning rolled up one of her sleeves, raising her arm towards him, “You either don’t return home at all, or get others to drown me in herbal medication, prick me with needles, and even stick a bunch of cups on my back the moment you come back. Smell it! Even now, I smell like canned meat.”

Boss Qu grabbed her arm and smelled it like a big dog. “It doesn’t smell at all. It still smells so good.”

The more he compromised, the more Ning Ning wanted to aggravate him, because from her point of view, disputes were the best way to figure out the relationship between them.

A side of a person that is typically concealed is exposed in a dispute, and words that one wouldn’t say normally would be said unconsciously. Although the other party would justify it as rambling

in the heat of the moment, according to Ning Ning's past experiences, words said in the moment of anger were genuine...

However, when she considered the gun hidden on Boss Qu's waist, Ning Ning dared not aggravate him too intensely in the beginning. She decided that proceeding step by step was much better... Accordingly, she still had time to beg for forgiveness.

"Hmph!" She pushed away Boss Qu, jumped off the bed and walked towards the wardrobe in bare feet.

Boss Qu bent down to retrieve her shoes and chased after her, "Ning'er, what's wrong now?"

"I can't stay here any longer." Ning Ning opened the wardrobe, taking out the cheongsams, dresses, and coats one by one and hanging them over her arm, "I want to run away from home."

There were so many good clothes in the wardrobe, along with matching hats and accessories. Though there was a mix of real and fake among the accessories, a majority of them were real. These items could not be eaten or consumed so only wealthy people could buy them. From Boss Qu's speech and demeanor, it was extremely likely that he had gotten rich recently.

Of the newly rich, there are two types. Those who strike it rich overnight, and those who seize a steady flow of money. *Just which type was he?*

"You can't go out." Boss Qu snatched away the clothing she had on her arm, his face stern. "The world outside is very messy..."

Ning Ning thought he was going to lecture her about worldly affairs, hence she quickly held her breath to listen carefully.

"... There are shady and wild men everywhere." Boss Qu's expression was extremely serious as he exclaimed, "One look from them will get you pregnant!"

Ning Ning, "..."

Do you think I'm an idiot?!

Ning Ning did not want to act like an idiot, but with such an upbringing, it seemed as though the probability of raising an idiot was really high. She was at a loss momentarily, before asking, "Then wouldn't it be okay if I just follow you? I promise not to wander, I'll just stay where you can see me. Oh, I can also help you with work..."

"You can't!" Boss Qu's disapproval intensified, "You won't be able

to do the work I have.”

“How do you know I can’t when you don’t even let me try?” To be honest, Ning Ning just wanted to know what he did for a living.

However, Boss Qu seemed to be hiding his work from her. He stammered, “This is work for men, women can’t do it...”

After a pause, he added, “Anyway, it will take at most, 5 years. No, 3 years! After 3 years papa will wash my hands of work, and then I’ll be with you here every day at home so you will never be lonely again.”

Ning Ning’s eyelids twitched incessantly. *Just what type of business only requires 3 years to live extravagantly for a lifetime?* When she considered the current era, Ning Ning could not help but think of military firearms and opium smuggling...

Boss Qu started feeling anxious when he saw that Ning Ning had grown silent.

“Look, I even brought you some other things.” He hastily brought over a huge pile of gifts: a silver hairpin with pearls, Peony Pavilion’s makeup and rouge box, one bottle of the Two Sisters brand perfume and some more items. “Do you like them?”

Ning Ning glanced at him, but she did not take the gifts. Instead, she took off the bracelet on her left wrist and proceeded to throw it at him.

“This can’t replace you!” She also took off the bracelet from the other wrist and threw it at him, “Or this! I’ll return both to you so that you will come back to me!”

Such a superficial conversation could only be a probe for superficial information... *Cough*, to put it frankly, Boss Qu was just too easily swayed, so much so that Ning Ning felt that if she didn’t do something extreme, he definitely wouldn’t quarrel with her! Though this was true, she still didn’t dare throw the bracelet at his face, fearing that he would either not get angry or beat her to death from anger...

However, she seemed to have forgotten that she was a klutz.

The first bracelet hit Boss Qu on his chest, and the second hit him right smack in the middle of his forehead.

Clank, clank, the two bracelet touched the ground simultaneously. The second one even had a trace of red on it which looked suspiciously like blood.

Ning Ning sharply drew a cold breath of air, mustering some courage after a few moments before slowly raising her head from the bracelets on the ground to Boss Qu's face.

He was crying.

Ning Ning, "..."

A man in his thirties, who was full of sinisterness and cunningness and who pulled out guns at people's heads, stood unmoving in place, shedding tears as he stared at her... *Forget it, why don't you just put a gun to my head!*

Ning Ning said, "Is, is it very painful?"

Boss Qu shook his head. His tears were like knives, cutting across his weathered face.

Ning Ning, "... Then why are you crying?"

Boss Qu turned around and brought his briefcase over. He opened it in front of Ning Ning. Instantly, she was face to face with a pile of silver dollars that illuminated her features. He scooped up a handful of silver dollars and offered them to her. His face held traces of tears but he still wore a fawning smile, "Ning'er, papa has earned a lot of money this time. I'll buy you whatever you want. You... you have things you want, right?"

Ning Ning stared at his face, stunned.

In that moment, she suddenly came to a realisation. This person... would never get into a fight with her.

She hit herself on the forehead and covered her eyes, asking, "...I can have anything I want?"

Boss Qu hastily nodded his head.

"I want to change papas..." Ning Ning spoke sincerely. Transmigrating was already very exhausting, hence she wanted a more normal papa!

"This is the only thing you can't have!" Boss Qu rejected resolutely.

"Alright." Ning Ning put her hand down, and casually changed her request offhandedly, "I want the chopped off head of Yuan Shikai."

(Note: Yuan Shikai was a senior general of the late Qing dynasty, subsequently the first president of the Republic of China(ROC) and self-proclaimed emperor of China)

She originally thought he would spend some time deliberating, and

then slowly say “Let’s talk over the previous request instead.” However, Boss Qu thought for a while, then pulled out his gun and started walking out.

“... Come back!!” Ning Ning hurriedly yelled after him.

Boss Qu turned around, his gaze appearing to be bidding farewell.

“... I was only joking with you.” Ning Ning took two steps towards him, before opening her arms wide and speaking with embarrassment, “Actually, I don’t want anything, just give me this...”

Without waiting for her to take her third step, a pair of strong arms had already pulled her into an embrace.

Ning Ning also returned his hug. In her heart, she had now understood the kind of person he was.

The conclusion was ... Boss Qu is simply a daughter loving maniac!

His daughter is the most beautiful, she is forever right, and even if she is wrong he will not correct her! He will satisfy all of his daughter’s unreasonable requests, he will constantly praise her and even force people around him to praise her as the most beautiful girl in the world. Thus, over time, what sort of a person will Qu Ning’er become?

She will think of herself as the most beautiful girl in this world!

Naive yet arrogant; willful and self-confident. Perhaps, she might even believe the Earth revolves around her!

This was the person Ning Ning was to portray.

Uncommon terms:

Pimp- a man who controls prostitutes and arranges clients for them, taking a percentage of their earnings in return.

Republic – In direct translation of 民国 (mínguó) which is short form for Republic of China. Used to describe the Republic of China period 民国时期 mínguó shíqí (1912 – 1949)

Youtiao- fried breadstick

Production line- over here it would be describing actors that have lost personality and are all the same.

Opium- a highly addictive narcotic drug acquired from the opium poppy. Heroin is derived from the morphine alkaloid found in opium.

Bound feet- the custom of applying tight binding to the feet of young girls to modify the shape and size of their feet. practiced in

China from the Tang dynasty until the early 20th century, and was considered a status symbol as well as a mark of beauty.

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely

Translation checked by: Tranzgeek

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 – Male & Female Lead

Currently, Ning Ning's emotions were complicated. Before transmigration, the film she had last acted in was <I Am a Big Beauty>. After transmigration, the first film she had to act in could more or less be also called <I Am a Big Beauty>.

Is this God's vengeance for the last bad movie I acted in? She murmured in her heart, then mocked herself, *ha, if this really is the punishment for acting in a bad movie, the entire showbiz world would have long become the main disaster area for human disappearance.*

The next day, she was woken up by Wang ma. When she opened her eyes, she spotted Wang ma standing outside the mosquito net with her back against the lighting. Wang ma's tone of voice was flat like a straight line. "Miss, time to wake up and wash up. Master has brought back a pair of rare items."

Ning Ning climbed off the bed and was just about to look for a mirror where she could wash up in front of, when Wang ma began wiping her face with a warmed up handkerchief. Then, helped her to comb her hair and change with nimble hands. She had even helped Ning Ning brushed her teeth. Once everything was done, Wang ma kneeled down by the bed and gently helped her put on her shoes.

... It can't be that she will now try to carry me like a baby then walk around? Ning Ning was so frightened by her thought that she hurriedly jumped off the bed and started walking towards the exit. But, at that moment, a cry of alarm came from Wang ma. "Miss! Your face!"

"What's wrong with my face?" Ning Ning said while touching her face.

Wang ma walked over with a mask. "Master has said that your face can only be seen by him as well as your future husband. Apart from them, your face is not allowed to be seen by a third man."

Ning Ning chuckled. "What if a third man accidentally sees it?"

Wang ma replied, "Then there will be one less man in this world."

... You are no doubt a maid, but why do you speak like a criminal syndicate killer?

The two arrived at the courtyard where the sun shone brightly. Under a plum tree in the courtyard, stood a chair padded with a thick seat cushion which Wang ma helped Ning Ning to sit on. At this moment, Ning Ning was wrapped up tight from top to toe, so much so that even her hands were covered with a pair of white lace gloves. The extent of wrapping made her feel as if she has Hansen's disease.

(Note: Hansen's disease is a contagious disease that affects the skin, mucous membranes, and nerves, causing discoloration and lumps on the skin and, in severe cases, disfigurement and deformities.)

Across from her, Boss Qu was urging over a pair— a young man and a young lady.

"You'll feel stuffy if you stay at home all day." Boss Qu flung the whip in his hands while smiling – just like the performers that put on a monkey show on the streets. "So I brought the two of them here to perform a few magic tricks for you."

Ning Ning let out an expression of surprise, which caused Wang ma ask, "Miss, What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Ning Ning might have said so, but she was currently going crazy internally.

She had transmigrated while watching the movie, so sometimes she couldn't help but wonder if her transmigration had anything to do with this strange movie? This whole time she hadn't found any evidence to the contrary, until now, as she sat face to face with this pair.

On the left was a young man who remained silent. He looked to be about fifteen to sixteen years old and had a figure which leaned towards the thinner side. He had stared at his black cloth shoes from the minute he entered, not once lifting up his head. Thus, Ning Ning could not clearly make out his facial features.

However, the young lady on the right was a complete contrast to him. She had been stealing glances towards Ning Ning from the start, looking as if she wanted a pair of arms to extend out of her eyes to peel off the mask, and get a clear look of Ning Ning's real face.

Boss Qu gave her a slap. "What are you looking at, lower your head!"

One side of her face immediately swelled. She lowered her head, not daring to give Ning Ning another look.

Ning Ning inhaled sharply. "Pa, don't hit her."

This person you just hit is called Li Xiulan, the female lead on the poster outside of Life Movie Theatre's entrance.

"Okay, I won't hit her." Boss Qu told her amiably, then turned around and continued his fierce manner towards Li Xiulan. "What are you standing still for, quickly give miss a show of your acrobats."

"Yes." Li Xiulan walked towards Ning Ning with head lowered. While walking, she flashed out nine linked rings. With her nimble hands, a flip showed the shape of a lantern, another flip, and it was in the shape of a silver ingot. After that, there were more and more different patterns that were gradually increasing in difficulty: a government official's hat, peony, and even a bicycle, this drew everyone present to applaud her.

However, nobody noticed that along with her flipping, her footsteps were gradually taking her nearer to Ning Ning, getting nearer and nearer...

Finally, the nine linked rings turned into a long rope. Then Li Xiulan practically exerted her entire body's strength to rush forward and use the long rope to circle Ning Ning's neck. Her eyes shifted towards Boss Qu's direction and she proceeded to shout herself hoarse, "Let me go!"

Almost at the same time of her shout, she was struck down by a shoulder and flung a few meters away.

Li Xiulan cried out at the impact as she fell to the ground. After a clear look at her perpetrator, she yelled in despair, "Chen Junyan!"

Ning Ning took a few deep breaths before turning to look at the young man beside her who was supporting her up with an arm.

A profile that had been carved with meticulous care by god.

Generally when we say that someone is a beauty, they would either be beautiful because of their eyes, or nose, or lips, or chin. However, that was not the case for him as all his facial features were beautiful. Even just his profile was like God's writing, like the faint warm sunlight shining on a piece of paper as a brush sketched out an extremely graceful curve.

Again, Ning Ning had seen this profile on the poster at Life Movie Theatre. It was the male lead, Chen Junyan.

At this moment, Boss Qu finally came back to his senses. He took a few steps towards

Li Xiulan. Right when Ning Ning thought he was about to whip her,

instead he threw his whip down to the ground, then stooped down to grab a handful of Li Xiulan's hair and proceeded to ruthlessly smash her head against a stone.

"Who allowed you to touch my daughter, huh, how dare you touch my daughter." His current facial expression was, contrary to expectation, not sinister at all. In fact, it was extremely calm as if he wasn't smashing a human head, but, instead, a potato.

In the beginning, Li Xiulan made blood-curling screeches, but gradually, her screams ceased and only the sound of her head smashing onto the stone could be heard, *dong, dong, dong...*

As someone who had grown up in the current age, Ning Ning was unable to accept what was happening in such a scene, thus she hurriedly cried out, "Papa! Stop! She's about to die!"

Boss Qu paused in his actions and hastily wiped the blood on his face with his shirt sleeve. However, not only did this act not wipe him clean, it instead left his entire face sticky with smeared blood so much so that even the two sides of his mustache were dyed a bright red. Ning Ning could not stop the shudder of fright that overcame her when he turned back with his usual fatherly smile on his face, telling her, "Ning'er don't be afraid, papa will clean this up right now."

While maintaining the smile, he continued wiping his face with one hand whilst the other hand dragged Li Xiulan's body by the hair as he slowly made his way out of the courtyard, leaving behind a long bloody trail.

With a trembling voice, Ning Ning asked, "Where is papa taking her?"

Wang ma replied indifferently, "To where she ought to go."

Ning Ning felt dizzy, *aren't you a maid, why do you speak like a mafia godfather?*

Chen Junyan, from his place on the side, hesitated for a moment, before quietly stating, "Since she injured miss, I'm afraid she doesn't have much time to live."

What? She's going to die like that? Ning Ning anxiously turned to him and said, "I've already forgiven her, so quickly go, and tell my papa to let her off."

Chen Junyan glanced at the trail of blood on the ground... then lowered his head and remained silent.

If not for the fact that Ning Ning was sure that Boss Qu was a

daughter maniac internally, she wouldn't have dared to try to uphold justice. After taking a deep breath, she attempted to stand up from the chair only to fall back down because of her legs that had turned jelly.

Wang ma opened her arms wide in a posture of carrying an infant...

Go away ahh!! Ning Ning jumped up from her seat and followed along the zigzag bloody trail.

"Miss, she is guilty and deserves punishment." Wang ma chased Ning Ning. "No matter where such a thing happens, only death awaits if a servant attacks their owner's young miss."

Ning Ning could only sigh internally— she was no saint that felt the need to insist on saving someone that had wanted to harm her either. However, both Li Xiulan and Chen Junyan were important to a theory she had, hence, she couldn't by any means allow anything to happen to either of them before she confirmed her speculation.

Fortunately, Boss Qu couldn't go fast while dragging a person along, thus, Ning Ning quickly caught up and shouted, "Pa!"

Boss Qu halted in his footsteps.

Ning Ning hurriedly moved to stand before him, then pointed at Li Xiulan by his foot. "Didn't you ask me what I want? I want her!"

A few days later, Li Xiulan kneeled outside with her head wrapped in a circle of white cloth and her hands bound behind her back.

A pearl beaded curtain hung between them, while Ning Ning sat inside as the wind gently blew, causing the pearl beads to produce light clanking sounds.

"You have miss to thank." Boss Qu stood behind Li Xiulan with his arms crossed on his chest. "If not for miss's plea for leniency, I would've long chopped you into pieces to feed to the dogs."

Ning Ning could swear she saw Li Xiulan secretly curl her lips in disdain.

"Bring it over!" Boss Qu had seen it too, as he stomped his foot and shouted behind him.

Wang ma walked over with her two hands holding onto a small wooden box, then, an odd thing happened. Li Xiulan who had been fearless just a moment before, started trembling from head to toe with beads of sweat suddenly dripping onto the ground unceasingly— just like a mouse who had seen a cat.

Ning Ning could not understand why Li Xiulan, who looked to not fear even death, would fear this box.

“You may be exempt from a death sentence, but punishment is inevitable.” Boss Qu slid the wooden box that he held in his hand through the pearl curtains, “Ning’er, you pick one and throw it to her.”

To be honest, Ning Ning felt pretty curious about what was inside. She took the box and placed it on her thighs, carefully opening it.

Inside, there was a pile of wooden men. No, to be more accurate one could say, there were only three wooden men while the rest were small animals with bizarre appearances. Ning Ning raised a wooden-carved puppy up to eye level; it had delicate four cute limbs, yet it had grown a twisted human face. Ning Ning furrowed her brows feeling a little uncomfortable. At the same time, Boss Qu outside said, “This puppy’s not a bad choice.”

From the ground, Li Xiulan let out a piercing shriek. This startled Ning Ning into a tremble which caused the puppy to fall back into the box as she lost her grip.

“No! No! Don’t give me this!” She cried out in a blood-curdling screech towards Ning Ning. Because she was kneeling down and could not walk, she crawled over on her knees. “Give me something else! Give me something else!”

Boss Qu kicked her back to the spot with a leg, and coldly said, “Who allowed you to shout and scream in front of miss?”

Li Xiulan fell to the ground, wailing, however, Boss Qu started humming a tune beside her. That tune traveled into Ning Ning’s ears; instantly, she felt as if she had been struck by lightning.

Because she was familiar with this tune.

At Life Movie Theatre, when the movie had just begun, she had heard the same voice, the same tune. The only difference was that one had only hummed the tune, while the other had sung the lyrics. The lyrics were, “Kidnapped kids are made to pick a wooden man. Whoever picks a lame, will have their legs broken; picks the blind, will be blinded; picks the amputee, we cut their limbs. Then, as beggars, they’ll beg for money.”

Drops of sweat once again trickled down Ning Ning’s forehead.

She sat unmoving on the seat, feeling as if the wooden box on her thighs weighed a thousand pounds – the pressure left her unable to

move even a little.

If her theory was correct, she must have transmigrated into a movie.

A movie called <Republic Circus>.

In the poster by the entrance, there was Chen Junyan, Li Xiulan, and a wooden box... Ning Ning lowered her head; right now, the wooden box lay on her thighs. That wooden box that could determine the fate of the male and female lead, as well as the fate of many others in the movie; perhaps, it might even determine the future development of the entire film.

Because...

A picture of the silver ingot, official's hat, peony

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 – Miss's Punishment

Ning Ning glanced at Boss Qu.

Because of that song of his.

“Kidnapped kids, are made to pick a wooden man. Whoever picks a lame, will have their legs broken; picks the blind, will be blinded; picks the amputee, we cut their limbs. Then, as beggars, they'll beg for money.” This song originally came from Zibuyu- ‘What The Master Would Not Discuss’- by Yuan Mei*. Ning Ning had not read the entire book but this paragraph wasn't hard to interpret; the general idea was that a group of human traffickers kidnapped children, then made them pick a wooden man from the wooden box: if a lame was picked, their legs would be broken, if one with broken arms was picked, they would have their arms broken. The human traffickers created a bunch of handicapped people, then threw them out onto the streets to beg for money.

No wonder Boss Qu was so rich. Because he was a human trafficker. Every silver dollar in his hands, every piece of clothing in her wardrobe, was deeply drenched in human blood.

The box on her thighs was the wooden box sung about in the lyrics. And, if the lyrics turned out to be true, then the kidnapped child would be made into the appearance of whatever wooden man they picked.

Yet, what led Ning Ning to shudder all over was that there were not many men in the box- it mostly consisted of animals.

Ning Ning gathered herself together and picked a wooden mouse up to give it a closer look; this wooden mouse was different from the human faced puppy that she had picked up earlier. This one was a small delicate mouse that had a pair of a human woman's big breasts.

“Good pick.” Boss Qu stopped humming and smiled. “This mouse beauty will do, it suits her.”

Li Xiulan once again started struggling, but was kicked down to the ground by Boss Qu who stepped on her mouth with his foot, making her unable to let out a word.

“Pa.” Ning Ning asked cautiously, “What are these small wooden

items... used for?"

She only knew of human traffickers making kidnapped children blind and lame, but to make them into a mouse or dog... *is this the magical version of the Republic period?*

"You don't have to know." Boss Qu obviously did not want her to know the truth, thus he replied ambiguously, "You just need to pick one."

"You, you agreed..." Li Xiulan struggled to say, "agreed to let me pick."

Boss Qu gave her a few more kicks, stating coldly, "That was before, now you don't have a choice."

Li Xiulan was helpless against him, hence she could only vent it out on someone else. A pair of eyes filled with resentment and hatred pierced through the curtain.

Behind the curtain, Ning Ning was currently stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Although she had no clue about the purpose of the other wooden carvings, instincts told her that it wasn't anything good, otherwise, Li Xiulan wouldn't be struggling so violently.

"Can I not pick?" Ning Ning rubbed the mouse beauty in her hand and quietly asked.

"There are only two outcomes for her today, to die, or to accept punishment." Boss Qu rejected her query immediately as he spoke out in a cold voice, "If she is allowed to walk out of here today without any punishment, anyone would dare to bully you in the future whenever I'm not around."

On this point, he was persistent in his own view, and would not budge no matter how hard Ning Ning tried to persuade him. Thus, without a choice, Ning Ning could only put the mouse beauty down and take out the only three wooden men from inside the box.

One was without arms, one without legs, and the last one was the most tragic, for everything below the waist was gone as if it had been chopped in half.

There was no other choice. Ning Ning closed her eyes for a moment, before throwing a wooden man out through the curtain.

The wooden man fell to the ground in front of Li Xiulan, and she climbed over with great difficulty to hold it in her hands. When she

had a clear look of it, her tears fell uncontrollably down, dripping onto the wooden man without arms.

“Why have you picked this?” Boss Qu clicked his tongue finding it a little pitiful.

“Don’t, don’t take away my arms.” Li Xiulan’s lips started trembling. “My hands are very skillful, they can do many things if you keep them...”

“Forget it, a pair of arms that can harm their owner is not worth keeping.” It was, after all, someone else’s arms, so Boss Qu might find it a pity at first, but would not find it pitiful for long. He started pulling her away. Meanwhile, Li Xiulan cried as she was being pulled away, turning around to look at Ning Ning from time to time – it wasn’t a pleading gaze but one filled with deep-rooted hatred. It seemed as if she had pinned all the blame of her sufferings on Ning Ning.

After the two left and a long time had passed, Ning Ning’s voice lightly traveled out from behind the curtains. “What will papa do to her?”

Wang ma said monotonously, “Don’t know.

She must know and just refuses to tell me, or doesn’t dare to tell me.

Ning Ning did not dare to delve in too deeply with her thoughts, for the more she delved the more frightened she felt. She shut her eyes and supported her head with a hand while the other hand picked up a wooden carving then let go of it – the carving fell back in the box, *thump, thump*. This process was repeated a few times, then, Ning Ning opened her eyes and said, “It is so stuffy. Oh right, where is that young man from before? Call him over to perform some magic tricks.”

Chen Junyan once again appeared in her courtyard, and she once again wrapped herself up tightly with only her voice travelling out from behind her mask. “What’s your name?”

“My surname is Chen.” The young man spoke with a lowered head, “My name is Junyan- jun from Jūnzǐ (nobleman), and yan from Yàntai (ink stone).”

Ning Ning nodded. *This was the right name, and now that the face and the name matched that poster, it was very likely that this world is the one from the movie.*

“What are you going to perform?” She asked.

Chen Junyan made a bow towards her and then he straightened his

back, crossed his arms on his chest, and suddenly did a backflip. After the flip, he did a few more consecutive flips until he reached the bottom of the tree. There, he pulled out a long rope from his coat.

He gave it a toss and the rope hung itself between two trees.

Taking the ground as a support, Chen Junyan swiftly leaped up onto the rope; one foot on the rope and the other in the air, then once again crossed his arms on his chest. He waited for the rope to gradually settle down from its shaking, made another somersault, then...*Boom!*

Ning Ning, who was getting ready to applaud, saw a blur, but by then he had already fallen headfirst to the ground, unable to get up for a long time.

“Are you okay?” Ning Ning straightened up on the chair and looked at him anxiously, worried he may have gotten a concussion from the huge fall.

Chen Junyan struggled to get up but failed to do so. But at last, with great difficulty, he managed to flip his body over into a prostrating position and with his head buried in the ground, he said, “Servant is useless, please exact punishment Miss.”

Ning Ning had absolutely no intention of punishing him because she had intentionally called him over in a bid to get closer to him. Thus, she smiled. “It was an accident, nothing to punish you over.”

However, Chen Junyan insisted on receiving punishment, and when he saw Ning Ning not reacting to his pleas, he started to get anxious. He lifted his head up. “Miss, please chastise me, otherwise master will punish me!”

When Ning Ning heard this, she gave it a thought, then said, “Fine, I’ll punish you since you insist on it.”

At her words, Chen Junyan heaved a sigh of relief; being punished by her would be better than master’s punishment because a young girl would unlikely be able to think of methods to torment him.

However, Ning Ning’s next words were, “What do you fear most?”

Chen Junyan’s face paled, thinking of lying to her but ultimately didn’t dare to. Thus, he could only tell her the truth. “...Servant, fears rats the most.”

Light laughter traveled over from above his bowed head, and he secretly took a glance. Ning Ning stood with her profile to him and currently had a white-gloved hand on her masked face while turning

back to say something to Wang ma. He dared not take a long look and quickly lowered his gaze. In a short while, Wang ma's footsteps could be heard leaving and coming back.

Rustling sounds made by a dress hemline rubbing against the ground gradually neared him, then, he heard miss's voice above him in near proximity. It was a naive yet arrogant and willful voice. "Your punishment is to eat what's in my hand."

Large beads of sweat trickled down Chen Junyan's forehead and fell into the soil on the ground. He replied, "Yes Miss, thank you for the punishment."

He had actually left out part of the truth; what he feared most wasn't rats, but rats that fed on human meat. A child that had been abducted together with him had died in the middle of the night in bed, and when his corpse was discovered in the morning, his ears and toe had already been gnawed off by the rat. He was the one that killed the rat, which had red eyes, perhaps because it fed on human meat.

Even if she had never left home before, she's Boss Qu's daughter after all, and tormenting people to her is natural instinct. Chen Junyan thought this as he slowly pushed himself up.

He saw a dot of dark red the minute he looked up.

It was currently mid winter with snow covering the ground, and a lone plum tree stood in the courtyard as the others had already withered away. Ning Ning stood before him, while behind her was the plum tree filled with pretty plum flowers. She stretched her white gloved hand out to him. In her hand was a snow white pastry with a red dot in the middle – just like a cinnabar mole on a beauty's forehead.

"Did you really think that I would make you eat a rat?" Ning Ning showed an expression of 'I find it dirty even if you don't mind', then casually pulled apart the pastry. "Look, it has sweetened bean paste filling."

After she spoke, she put one half in her mouth and gave the other half to him.

Chen Junyan took the pastry whilst hesitating, with Wang ma watching his hand with an intense gaze, he suddenly had no idea whether to eat it or not. In the end, he clenched his teeth and put the pastry into his clothes. "Something this good, I'll bring it back and eat it slowly."

"Are you giving it to the young girl from last time?" Ning Ning

asked abruptly.

Another bout of cold sweat overcame Chen Junyan. He hurried to clarify his relations to her. "After she committed such a heinous crime, I can't wait to personally kill her to help miss vent your anger. Why would I want to specially bring something back for her?"

Ning Ning blinked. "I thought the both of you had a good relationship."

"I am not familiar with her. We are only learning tricks together and know each other's names." Chen Junyan continued to emphasize the fact that he wasn't close to her.

Ning Ning said, "Orh, what's her name?"

"Li Xiulan." Chen Junyan replied.

Now Ning Ning had also confirmed the female lead. She gave Wang ma a glance and Wang ma walked away to bring the pastry plate to her. Ning Ning took the plate and turned around to give it to Chen Junyan. "Take it, share it with Li Xiulan."

Chen Junyan left with a heavy heart while hugging the pastries. After he left, Ning Ning asked, "Where's papa?"

She couldn't leave home at all, not even a step. Only Wang ma was allowed to freely leave and enter, however, it was very simple for her to see Boss Qu. "Help me tell him I miss him."

Not even two hours later, Boss Qu appeared before her.

He had even changed into a new set of clothes to conceal the faint bloody smell on him.

My nose has been spoiled, no! I have no nose! Ning Ning tried to hypnotize herself, then asked, "Papa, do you run a circus?"

Boss Qu's gaze sharpened immediately. "Who told you that?"

Ning Ning had guessed it, as the movie was called <Republic Circus> and both the male and female lead were present and possessed acrobatic skills. Thus, it was easy to have thought of this outcome. She pulled Boss Qu's arm and said, "This you don't have to know, just get more people to come over tomorrow."

Boss Qu blinked his eyes. "Why? Do you like acrobats a lot?"

"That's right. " Ning Ning lied through her teeth, for she was definitely someone who would rather watch a commercial than watch the acrobatics channel. Yet now she wore the expression of one being

obsessed with acrobatics. “I love watching acrobatics, do you have anymore people? Tell them all to come and perform for me.”

She wanted to witness with her own eyes the type of circus Boss Qu owned, then find out the truth and details and get to the bottom of this...In any case, she needed to be clear on the movie genre for <Republic Circus>, whether it be a romance, literary, suspense, drama, or a documentary movie that revealed how a circus operates!

...Please don't let it be a horror movie!

Yuan Mei*- What the Master Would Not Discuss is a collection of supernatural stories compiled by Qing Dynasty scholar and writer Yuan Mei in 1788.

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 – The Spider’s Thread

To the members of the circus, this performance was an opportunity, an opportunity for them to escape from the abyss of suffering.

Another name: The abyss of suffering was also called ‘Boss Qu’.

This sinister, cunning, and vicious fellow without a shred of humanity in him, would only drape a piece of outer skin, known as ‘loving father,’ over himself in front of his daughter – turning from a beast to a clothed beast*.

“It’s impossible to completely escape from the abyss of suffering.” A young man who had just returned from his performance sighed. “But within the scope of Miss’s vision, will be a piece of pure land.”

And then, the competition began, and Chen Junyan who had an advantage over the others due to his looks, became the first victim.

That night, Chen Junyan was suddenly attacked by someone who muffled him with a blanket while he was deep asleep, then proceeded to shower him with waves of hits. These hits were aimed specifically at his face. The next day, he turned up to morning assembly with one half of his face swollen. Boss Qu slowly strolled along the front of the formation while tapping his whip against his palm with a steady beat. His footsteps stopped abruptly when he passed by Chen Junyan. He slightly lifted up Chen Junyan’s chin then asked indifferently, “You guys did this?”

Everyone immediately grew uneasy, *is Boss Qu going to stand up for him?*

Boss Qu scanned everyone’s faces, then let out a cold snort, “Your unswollen faces, can’t even compare to his swollen face.”

Nighttime, Chen Junyan was met with another round of attack. This time, everyone had learned from their previous failure and hit him evenly so that he became swollen on both sides, making sure his attractiveness was pulled down to less than average.

The next day, Boss Qu let out a satisfied laugh, then pointed at him with the whip. “You’ll do, come with me.”

We’ve been tricked!! Everyone howled in grief internally, *So he’s*

intentionally choosing an ugly duckling to bring to Miss in order for him to accentuate his own handsomeness and tall stature??*

“What’s wrong with your face?” Inside the courtyard, Ning Ning asked curiously.

Chen Junyan glanced over at Boss Qu who stood beside her, and answered with a lowered head, “I fell down due to my carelessness last night.”

Ning Ning got up from the chair and walked to stand before him. Then, leisurely walking round him in a circle, she held out a hand to lift his chin up to make him turn his head to look at her as she stood at his side. “Your injury doesn’t look like it’s from a fall.”

Boss Qu gave a loud cough. Ning Ning nonchalantly withdrew her hand, then she heard Boss Qu speak coldly, “Since you’re injured, go back first to take a rest.”

...As if this is a pure land, it’s clearly the ocean’s abyss of suffering that has neither shore nor boat!

Chen Junyan was unwilling to leave when he had just come, for he had no idea when he would get another chance to come here. No, to be more accurate, with Miss’s show of intimacy towards him today, he supposed there wouldn’t be another chance for him to appear before her in his lifetime.

I must get into Miss’s good graces, must get rid of Boss Qu’s suspicions.

Both must be executed at the same time! That’s what I should do!

“Aren’t you leaving!” Boss Qu gave him an unfriendly look.

...Forget it, I can only have a future if I’m still alive, thus let me leave for now. This matter has to be carefully planned.

Chen Junyan returned back dejectedly to the circus. Just as he thought, he was never again picked by Boss Qu, and could only look on helplessly as other people from the same dorm were chosen one after the other. When they came back, they would gather together in either a large group, or small ones, to talk about the Miss.

“Miss truly is kind-hearted. Not only did she ask me if I was tired, she also offered me pastries.”

“She doesn’t resemble master at all...They must not be related!”

“Amitabha, please let me be chosen tomorrow, and please don’t let the pastry tomorrow be durian flavoured.”

Chen Junyan grieved for them who had been bribed with just a few pieces of pastries- forgetting just who they had to owe for their current predicament, and forgetting what lay in wait for them in their future.

After he listened to a few more lines, Chen Junyan could take it no more. He lifted his blanket and sat up, sneering at everyone. "Have you all forgotten about the incident regarding Li Xiulan?"

Instantly, the room grew so quiet that a pin drop could be heard. Everyone stopped their conversations and turned to look at him.

"Don't forget about her outcome." Chen Junyan spoke in a heavy tone. "Her current outcome will be our future outcome."

When everyone thought of the pitiful state Li Xiulan was currently in, they couldn't help feeling the fear lingering in their hearts.

There were in total eight people here in the circus, and when adding Li Xiulan and another girl, there would be ten people. All of them were reserves for the circus. However, different from other circus' reserves, who wanted to get a spot on stage using every means possible, none of them wanted to become a 'big star' of this circus.

"Also, don't forget that once we too had a home before we were kidnapped and brought here." Chen Junyan looked around at everyone, his gaze stopping on a young man. "I remember you said your family runs a sea shipping business and is quite rich. You've always been able to eat bird's nest and sharks fin whenever you've wanted to since you were young. But now? A few pieces of pastries and you've already forgotten who you are?"

Those words reached right into that young man's heart. He lowered his head down, *sniff, sniff*, and started crying.

The others weren't feeling any better; none of them present had joined the circus willingly for they had all been kidnapped and brought here.

"...What's the point of thinking so much?" Another young man who couldn't stand the depressing mood, spoke up in a low voice, "We can't go back anyways, so living to see another day is a day. If y'all want to make trouble, you can go ahead without me. I don't want to end up like Li Xiulan. I'm going to try Miss's path; even if I can't be a person, being a lowly pet under Miss is fine as well."

Thus, the depressing mood was swept clean as everyone looked at each other with twinkling eyes, seeming to share the same thought.

Life wasn't easy, especially for people like them with such a bitter fate. Hence, even if it was a spider's thread that had dropped above their heads, they would still grab it at all costs. Hoping that following it would help them climb out of the abyss.

Henceforth, everyone once again began discussing 'Getting Close to Miss' 101': from "speculating about Miss's preference due to the daily pastries rewards" to "the type of boy Miss likes"...As for the latter, everyone thought Miss liked their type.

As per usual, Chen Junyan didn't take part in their discussion because he had already found the person he was looking for.

A young man with a freckled face sat in the midst of the crowd. He made a few attempts to join the discussions but was always overlooked by the others, leaving him with no choice but to stay silent and listen in.

Little Freckle. As for his real name, nobody remembered. Boss Qu called him by Little Freckle, hence everyone called him that too.

During dinnertime, Chen Junyan brought his bowl over to sit beside Little Freckle. Little Freckle glanced over at him, then lowered his head to resume eating.

"How's it going?" Chen Junyan shoved rice into his mouth, asking as he chewed, "Does Miss like your ball balancing show?"

Right before Chen Junyan had asked the question, he had already known the answer. Because Little Freckle was the least skilled amongst them, as well as the ugliest, everyone had assumed that he would be the first one leaving the reserves to join the circus to be a 'big star' – even he himself thought so.

Sure enough, Little Freckle's face turned white as sheet before he put down his chopsticks and lowered his head. "Not too fond..."

"Is Miss not too fond of you or your show?" Chen Junyan asked.

"Not too fond of my ball balancing show, no, not too fond of me..." Little Freckle lowered down his head and choked up with emotion. "She doesn't like my show or me."

He had always pitied himself and thought everyone hated him. In actual fact, most people didn't hate him, but instead, completely ignored his existence.

Chen Junyan wasn't his enemy or his friend; approaching Little Freckle was purely for the purpose of his plan. Thus, Chen Junyan sighed. "What'll you do? I heard someone in the circus was injured

and doesn't seem to be recovering even after treatment, so master will soon choose one of us to replace them."

"What?" Little Freckle let out a cry of alarm. "Hasn't Li Xiulan been requested already?"

"Shh!" Chen Junyan put a finger to his lips and looked around warily, before speaking in a lowered voice, "Li Xiulan went there to receive punishment, while choosing us is the normal replacing of old with new. How's it the same?"

Little Freckle believed his words and immediately paled. He asked with trembling lips, "Th-then do you know, who master has decided on?"

"How would I know?" Chen Junyan turned his attention back to his bowl of rice. "Eat up, the rice is turning cold."

How could Little Freckle have any appetite left. He sat crestfallen beside Chen Junyan while playing with his rice.

Chen Junyan quietly finished the rice and sides in his bowl, then washed up and returned to his room. And that night, Little Freckle tossed and turned relentlessly in bed behind him. Chen Junyan slightly opened his eyes and then quietly shut them.

The days passed by, but nobody realized the abnormalities with Little Freckle except Chen Junyan.

Firstly, because he didn't have much of a presence. Secondly, he didn't have any friends. Last but most importantly, everyone's attention had been drawn away by Miss; compared to Little Freckle, everyone was more concerned about who Miss would call to come over the next day.

Thus, under everyone's indifference, Little Freckle slowly crumbled apart.

Chen Junyan spotted it and wanted to say something a few times, only to restrain himself from doing so at the very last moment. He knew that Little Freckle was someone who was easily contented, so much so that he didn't need to say anything except to just give Little Freckle a pat on the back or give him a single stalk of vegetable from his bowl when eating. Thus, it would be as if he had grasped onto a spider's thread that hung down from the hole entrance – holding on tightly to this gleam of hope.

But I can't do that, Chen Junyan thought whilst looking at the back view with hunched shoulders of the other party.

The next day, as per usual, only one person was called over to perform for Miss.

“Little Freckle!” Boss Qu called out, “It’s your turn today!”

In the midst of the crowd, Little Freckle’s body trembled as a sparkle lit up in his eyes. However, it was drowned out by Boss Qu’s next words. “This is probably the last time, so go and prepare quickly.”

Chen Junyan looked at Little Freckle and could vaguely see the spider’s thread on him snap.

A person can persevere on when they have a gleam of hope, but what if there isn’t even a shred of hope?

They will take a risk out of desperation.

Sorry, I have no ill feelings towards you, but this is something I must do, Chen Junyan thought as he looked at Little Freckle’s slowly disappearing figure.

He shut his eyes, then opened them. He walked passed the stream of people and headed straight toward where Boss Qu stood.

The Circus was currently on a performance tour, hence there were many administrative matters to settle and Boss Qu would deal with those tasks first before going back home to accompany Ning Ning to watch the tricks. That said, the performers weren’t given any chance to leave alone as someone would follow them on their path to Miss, and won’t leave even after they had reached her, guards would keep watch until Boss Qu returned.

From his daily eavesdropping on other people’s conversation, Chen Junyan gradually discovered an important piece of information.

That guard...has a small bladder. He could hold it in for at most an hour before he would need to relieve himself, and the journey to and from the toilet was approximately a minute. Chen Junyan had already leaked this piece of information as well as another one that was even more significant to Little Freckle in a roundabout way.

Finally, he approached Boss Qu and said in a submissive manner, “Master, Miss is in danger.”

Uncommon terms:

Clothed beast- 衣冠禽兽(yī guān qín shòu) is used to describe a beast dressed/concealed in human clothing. Sometimes used jokingly to describe a well-mannered man that’s a beast in bed.(this is not the

case here, as clothed beast here is used to describe an immoral and despicable person).

Abyss of suffering- (a buddhist term)

Pure land-(buddhism) refers to Amitabha Buddha's pure land of ultimate bliss.

Ugly duckling- the original text translates to ugly cunt which I felt was too barbaric hence ugly duckling.

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely

Thanks for reading~

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 – Papa’s Lies

“What’s wrong Little Sparrow?” In the courtyard, Ning Ning looked curiously at the young man before her.

The other party remained silent for a moment, before stating quietly, “I’m not Little Sparrow, my name is Little Freckle.”

(T/N note:Sparrow is Máquè(麻雀) and Freckle is Quèbān(雀斑))

Ning Ning immediately felt awkward. Calling another party by the wrong name wasn’t intentional, but because there were truly so many people that had come over to perform, and he had come over the least...But most importantly, he didn’t have much of a presence.

Cough, “Take a seat, Little Freckle.” Ning Ning masked her awkwardness with a cough. “Let’s take a short break and wait for my papa to come back before starting.”

Wang ma brought pastries and tea for Ning Ning, Little Freckle, and the guard. Although the guard declined the tea, he still couldn’t control his bladder – one hour later, tremblings started emerging from his body...

“...Go if you need to.” Ning Ning said.

“Excuse me, I’ll make it quick.” The guard left while trembling with his legs bent together.

After he left, Ning Ning absent-mindedly ate her pastries. If it wasn’t for that incident involving Li Xiulan, she could have nearly believed this to be a documentary about the daily life in a circus, with the synopsis probably going something like this: Boss Qu, like the magician genius Liu Qian, leads his disciples and grand disciples to carve a niche of their own. In the process of doing so, member of the circus- Chen Junyan and Li Xiulan fall in love and slowly became a couple... *something doesn’t feel right!*

“Hm?” Ning Ning abruptly came back to her senses and turned to gaze at the young man before her. “Little Freckle, what’s wrong?”

Little Freckle looked odd. He had his head lowered while his gaze looked Ning Ning up and down. His cheeks were red, he breathed heavily, and his hands that hung at the side of his body constantly

clenched and released. Then, he took a stride and rushed up to her—lifting an arm up in an attempt to grab the mask on Ning Ning's face.

Nobody expected this move, or to be more accurate, nobody thought he would dare to do so.

“What are you trying to do?” Wang ma broke out into cold sweat and, without thinking, threw her body forward to stop him.

However, Little Freckle was prepared for Wang ma's pounce. The ball in his hand was in a gunny sack, and although it could be called a ball, it was actually a rock that had been sanded round with coloured paint applied to it. During his performances, he would throw six of them into the air and juggle them, but because Little Freckle's skills weren't too good, he would throw one up into the air and then drop one, causing the audiences to jeer at him.

But his operation this time didn't require him to have much skill.

He ruthlessly smashed the rock within the gunny sack onto Wang ma's face, causing her face to turn from a pale color to one dyed in red.

Taking advantage of the time given as Wang ma fell to the ground making blood-curling screeches, Little Freckle took a sharp inhale, turned around and proceeded to walk towards Ning Ning.

The second his hand grabbed onto Ning Ning's mask, she asked him, “Do you know the consequence of doing this?”

“Only two people can see your face: one of them is Boss Qu, and the other is your husband.” Little Freckle's hands were trembling as well as his voice, he mumbled the information Chen Junyan leaked to him. “If I see your face, I'll be your husband.”

“No.” The black-hole of a gun muzzle slowly came into view from behind him and pressed into his head. Following the sound of loading the gun, Boss Qu's voice sounded coldly behind him, “There will be one less man in this world.”

Little Freckle froze completely.

In the midst of his crisis, he made up his mind.

A tearing sound was heard, and he pulled the mask off Ning Ning's face; the great amount of strength that he placed behind tearing it off caused Ning Ning to turn halfway in place. Once she had regained her balance, she touched the half of her face that stung painfully.

“I've seen it! I've seen it! I-I've...” Little Freckle raised the mask

high up in the air as if he was raising a champion gold medal. Halfway through his celebration, he caught a glance of Ning Ning's real face, and his laughter immediately ceased. His eyes went wide open and he couldn't stop the following words that escaped his lips, "...So ugly?"

Bang, as Little Freckle fell into the pool of blood, his eyes were still wide open while his lips formed the final shape of his last word 'ugly'.

Despite this, Boss Qu still wasn't satisfied and continued firing a few shots at the corpse, *bang, bang, bang*. The corpse on the ground started jumping about from the gunshots. Once Boss Qu fired his last shot, he kept the gun behind his waist before turning around to block Ning Ning's view with his body and held her shoulders to comfort her. "Don't listen to his gibberish, you aren't ugly, not at all. You are the most beautiful girl in the world."

Ning Ning wore a grave expression and her shoulders were slightly shivering under his palms.

The twitching corpse on the ground, as well as the indifferent murderer standing before her, told her that this film she was in was absolutely not a documentary of circus life, nor could it purely be a romantic film—because it truly was too cruel.

"...Papa." Ning Ning shut her eyes tightly to keep from looking at the disturbing scene. She lightly spoke while in his arms, "Don't lie to me anymore."

A few days later, inside the circus.

Chen Junyan arrived outside the door of Boss Qu's resting room. He hesitated for a moment and was about to reach out to knock, when he heard a voice travelling out from within. "Come in."

"Yes." Chen Junyan took a sharp inhale.

The second he opened the door and entered, he couldn't believe the scene he was witnessing.

Was that man seated in front of him really Boss Qu?

He had never seen him in such a depressed and helpless state...

Boss Qu's current appearance was extremely terrible—his hair that was always kept swept back tidily, now lay on his head like a patch of messy grass; even his mustache, of which he was extremely proud of, had one side missing. That faint blood scar on his upper lip showed

that he was too preoccupied with his thoughts while grooming, thus he brought upon a bloody disaster on his face.

He sat behind a wooden table with fingers crossed together resting before his lips. Seemingly to be deep in thought, he waited for Chen Junyan to get closer, before abruptly lifting his head up to stare directly at him. "The circus currently lacks a member, and I intend to pick you as a replacement."

For a quick moment, Chen Junyan began to think that he had been exposed— that Boss Qu already knew he was the one that had incited Little Freckle into action.

This feeling was especially strong when Boss Qu's right hand reached down to pull open a drawer, from which he retrieved an item. *Bam*, he threw it onto the table.

It was an old-fashioned wooden box.

Gulp, Chen Junyan swallowed his saliva.

Boss Qu closely observed every change of his expression. He lifted his hand to stroke his mustache before stating indifferently, "But, I can also give you another choice."

Chen Junyan moved his gaze from the box to Boss Qu's face, speaking with a dry voice, "What choice?"

"My daughter... Ning'er." As he spoke her name, Boss Qu's expression softened to the degree that Chen Junyan was almost about to mistake him as a person with blood, flesh, and feelings. "She has fallen ill."

Chen Junyan listened on quietly.

"People that are ill, will look more haggard." Boss Qu said softly, "Hence why I never allow her to go out, nor have I placed any mirrors at home. Even the people who are allowed to personally serve her have been carefully selected. They will not tell her she had fallen ill, and will only tell her she is the most beautiful girl in the world. This is in no way a lie, for once I've gotten the physician to cure her, she will definitely be the most beautiful in the world. But the problem is, a mishap happened today..."

Chen Junyan asked carefully, "Did Little Freckle do something?"

Boss Qu laughed icily. "He's now a dead freckle. To think he would dare peel off Ning'er's mask and even call her ugly."

From Chen Junyan's understanding of Little Freckle, if he said ugly,

then it was very likely that she was truly ugly... Boss Qu passionately speaking of ugly as related to illness, should also somewhat explain it?

Chen Junyan suppressed the guilt in his heart, and asked resolutely and respectfully, "Is there anything I may help you with?"

Boss Qu glanced over at him, and suddenly, he crossed his legs up onto the table and casually picked up a few wooden carvings to toy with in his palm. Only when beads of sweat on Chen Junyan's face started trickling down, did he slowly state, "Little Freckle's words were such a heavy blow to Ning'er, that none of my, nor the servants' words can reach her. She insists we're lying."

"You aren't lying, the liar is Little Freckle." Chen Junyan said with head lowered. "Please rest assured, I'll explain clearly to Miss. She may not be willing to listen to people around her, but perhaps she will want to listen to the words of an outsider like me."

Boss Qu unhurriedly nodded; he abruptly lowered his legs placed on the table, and threw the two wooden carvings he was toying with back into the wooden box. Then, he picked up the box and walked towards Chen Junyan.

"Let's go." He stopped momentarily beside Chen Junyan.

Chen Junyan hastily followed after his footsteps.

It was currently morning, a time when most people would still be snuggled up in their cozy blanket in bed. However, the reserves of the circus were already up and practicing. The news of the need for a replacement for the main performer had already spread like wildfire. Nobody wanted to be the worst, for the worst would be the chosen one to 'graduate' and be on stage as a main performer.

Right when practice was in full swing- fire breathing, balancing a stack of bowls on one's head- they suddenly spotted Boss Qu, or to be more accurate to say, when the wooden box in his arms was spotted, everyone's expression immediately turned a one-eighty. The one walking on stilts stumbled with his right foot stepping on the left- *crash*- he fell with a large crash but didn't dare to let out a single cry of pain. He hurriedly climbed up from the ground and got back on his stilts to continue practicing in front of Boss Qu.

Don't choose me.

I beg you.

I'm still useful.

Practically everyone's body language seemed to emit this message.

"Chen Junyan." Boss Qu looked at each one of them as he unhurriedly raised his right hand that held that old wooden box.

"Here." Chen Junyan stood behind him respectfully.

"Do you want to be a member like them." Boss Qu slowly turned around and smiled at him. "Or do you want to be like me, to be the one that holds the box?"

In a split second, all gazes in the courtyard were concentrated on Chen Junyan.

Those gazes were one of jealousy, envy, hatred, *inconceivable*, *why is it him...*

Even if Chen Junyan had never thought of becoming someone like Boss Qu, he couldn't help the smugness that overcame him under those gazes. He nearly believed he wasn't part of the pitiful creatures, and had become another type of person... The type that could easily control their life and death.

"Work hard." Boss Qu patted him on the back while smiling, and suddenly brought his head closer to his with his lips plastered onto his ear. Boss Qu whispered with a voice only audible to both of them, "I know you can do it well. Since you can even convince Little Freckle to die on your behalf, you can also convince Miss to believe you, right?"

In a quick second, Chen Junyan woke up from his illusion. When he turned around, Boss Qu's smile was reflected in his eyes, yet it chilled him to the bones, awaking him once again to the truth of the matter.

His fate, had never been grasped in his own hands, and had always been in Boss Qu's...

...No, It was now in Miss's hands...

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 – I Believe

Chen Junyan initially thought that he would come face-to-face with a wailing Miss, but that wasn't the case.

The huge bout of snow was sudden, and since there was no way Boss Qu would allow Ning Ning to watch the performance in the snowstorm, they had all gathered in the room, sipping on wine beside the red clay fireplace.

Ning Ning was the one who broke the silence; she unhurriedly turned the porcelain bowl in her hands. The warm rice wine inside followed her movement by swirling along the rim of the bowl, the steam assailing her nostrils. It left her a little intoxicated without having taken a single sip. She lifted her gaze and asked in an unusually calm voice, "You're here to persuade?"

Chen Junyan took a quick glance at her— she not only had a calm voice, but a calm expression as well.

...The only problem is that she's too ugly.

From his side Boss Qu stared intensely at him, hence he didn't dare to lower his head nor shift his line of sight. All he could do was fixate his gaze on Ning Ning's face, "I'm not here to persuade."

"Really?" Ning Ning wore a mischievous smile as she placed the bowl down, stood up, and began to walk towards him. She crossed her arms behind her back while her upper body tilted towards Chen Junyan. That face which could either make babies stop wailing or even make them cease breathing came very close to him. "Look at me and tell me, what do I look like in your eyes?"

Boss Qu coughed lightly— a clear warning signal.

A Qing dynasty princess, a fairy that fell from heaven, and a noble flower in the mortal realm... all these cliché terms had been memorised carefully by Chen Junyan. However, he had no intention of using any of them at this moment, for they were truly too fake. Every single word was fake!

"You... aren't pretty." Chen Junyan had just spoken those three words when he heard the sound of a gun being loaded. The palm he placed on his knee immediately clenched into a fist. He endured the

fear inside and resolutely told Ning Ning without blinking even once, "Is that what you think?"

Ning Ning was stunned into silence.

"Miss, why do you have to think of yourself this way?" Chen Junyan spoke slower this time. "No one has ever said that you're ugly, or perhaps someone has, but besides him, everyone else says you're a beauty. Why do you not believe the people around you, but that one stranger instead?"

"I..." Ning Ning hesitated before continuing, "Because I know that what he said was the truth."

"Why are you so sure?" Chen Junyan countered.

Because I'm not Qu Ning'er, and I do not believe Boss Qu's words at all. Ning Ning relaxed her shoulders and faked a relaxed smile. "Isn't it obvious? The reason why there isn't even one mirror in my room is because they're afraid I might faint from the shock. Also, isn't it because I might frighten the passers-by on the road the reason why I have never been allowed out of the house my entire life?"

Chen Junyan started laughing. "Miss, you seemed to be talking about someone else and not yourself."

Ning Ning was once again stunned into silence. Then, her cheeks heated up as a sudden bout of shame overcame her.

If this was a film set, I reckon the director would have called 'cut'. Not only have I failed in playing the role of Qu Ning'er, I've also almost broken myself entirely from the role.

"You, yes, you!" The director threw his script to the ground and walked over to point at her while swearing. "Why are you always breaking character?!"

Breaking character.

This was the reason why Ning Ning could never become popular.

No matter the role she acted in, it would all end up with the same feeling– the uncomfortable feeling of an actor breaking character.

To an actor, this was practically a fatal shortcoming.

Many people wanted to know the reason why, as did Ning Ning herself. Initially, she thought it was because she lacked in fundamentals, but despite training desperately to get better, there was no progress made. Then, she thought it could be because of her lack of experience, however, when she took up a bunch of roles, the same

problem arose in every one of them...

“You don’t believe.” That is, until today, when Chen Junyan hit the nail on the head with his words, “You don’t believe your papa’s words, nor your maid’s words, neither do you believe my words, nor yourself... Wait!”

Chen Junyan sized Ning Ning up with an extremely strange gaze, then asked, “Do you... not believe yourself to be Qu Ning’er?”

There was a split second when Ning Ning thought he had seen through her disguise...

She gave Boss Qu a look as her face went pale as a sheet, extremely nervous that his next words would be, ‘Miss is ill again, call Physician Wang over to prescribe medicine and do acupuncture, quick!’

In order to avoid suffering, she quickly retorted, “How can that be, of course I’m Qu Ning’er.”

... How could I be Qu Ning’er...

Ning Ning, “Who would I be if not Qu Ning’er?”

... I’m Ning Ning, daughter of a movie empress. I can’t let others laugh at me, I must become even better at acting...

Ning Ning, “I, I...”

There was no need for any more words, for she had already understood.

As it turns out, her most fatal shortcoming– was that she didn’t believe.

Many a times, the first thought she had upon receiving a script was, ‘Such a stupid story actually exists???’ her second thought was, ‘Such a dumb female lead actually exists???’ Following that she would tell herself, “As a movie empress’s daughter, I can’t act horribly and let others mock me and mummy.”

...Yet the more effort she put in, the worser her acting was...

She had tried very hard to act, act the way she felt the character should react and move. However, she could never believe in herself, believe that others would be able to see through her horrible acting...

“Ning’er.” Boss Qu got up and walked towards her to grasp her hand in his and asked with a face full of concern, “Are you alright?”

Ning Ning had no idea how she looked at this moment, but reckoned it wasn’t too good, hence why everyone in the room was

currently looking at her with concern.

“I’m alright.” She forced herself to smile. “Give me some time, I need some time alone.”

Once she finished speaking, she turned around and left. As she walked, she slowly began to run and very soon, she disappeared from everyone’s sight.

The minute she left, Boss Qu’s facial expression made a one hundred and eighty degree change as he picked up the wine bowl on the table and threw it at Chen Junyan, shouting, “What nonsense have you just said! What do you mean by ‘do you not believe yourself to be Qu Ning’er?’ Is this any way to talk? Do you know how to speak?! If you don’t, then there’s no point in keeping your mouth!”

Burning hot wine splattered onto Chen Junyan’s body, but he had neither the guts to wipe it off nor to retort. He quickly stood up from the chair and stood still with his head lowered as beads of sweat trickled down. *Drip, drip*, he started to regret his previous course of action, *I shouldn’t have been so forward earlier and perhaps should have started off with a brief: Miss is a Qing dynasty princess, a fairy that fell from heaven, and a noble flower in the mortal realm...*

No, I couldn’t do that.

Time is already running out, I must get into Miss’s good graces as soon as possible, and those superficial words will get me nowhere. I have to speak heartfelt words that will get through to Miss.

Furthermore, I was in no way lying.

Though I’m not sure what’s going on, Miss seems to truly believe she isn’t Qu Ning’er...

“I’m Qu Ning’er”

In her room, Ning Ning sat all alone with the doors shut tight, changing postures from time to time while revealing a smile at times or even talking to herself. In the end, she scratched her head harshly in frustration. “Wrong, wrong, all wrong. There’s no way Qu Ning’er would smile this way or speak these words.”

Ning Ning’s original plan to figure out the secret of this movie in order to find the way back had now been thrown aside.

“...What’s the point of returning now?” Ning Ning looked down at her hands, her empty hands that were trembling uncontrollably. “I’m

still my former self, unable to even get into character for such a simple role...”

She resolutely clenched her hands together, just as if she was attempting to grasp onto something. With eyes shut tight, she repeated again and again in self-hypnosis, “I’m Qu Ning’er, a *Qing* dynasty princess, a fairy that fell from heaven, and a noble flower in the mortal realm... I’m the most beautiful girl in the world...”

This script that once made her incomparably ashamed gradually brought her into a serene mood.

“I’m not really intelligent because I’ve never been out of the house, nor been to school. But that’s of no importance. I’m so pretty that I’ll have everything.” The very first change was her voice that slowly became giddy and wilful, the kind of giddy where it was as if her stomach was filled to the brim with cotton.

(T/N: this means she’s feeling light)

She took two steps forward, then stopped.

“No,” Ning Ning mumbled with her head lowered, “There’s no way I would walk so steadily.”

“No,” Ning Ning mumbled with her head lowered, “There’s no way I would walk so steadily.”

Then, she proceeded to walk to and fro around the room with light footsteps that practically kicked up her skirt with every step. Such a manner of walking would be described as cute if it were done by a five to six year old girl, but seen from a young lady of her age would be considered childish.

However, no one had ever taught her the proper way for she was only surrounded by servants who would obey her every command, and never had a mother to correct her mistakes.

Taking a few more steps forward, Ning Ning paused and mumbled, “I still need to have a hobby.”

She took out and placed an exquisite cheongsam, an expensive jewelry box, as well as a blonde doll onto the table. Her finger slowly hovered above them, *this won’t do, nor this*, “Since there’s no way to confirm my past hobby, why don’t I have a new one?”

A suitable target quickly came to mind.

“A boy that can perform acrobatics.” The corners of Ning Ning’s lips lifted up. “Is there anything fresher and more interesting than

this?”

This will do.

A girl that has never left home will not have too complicated a personality. Naive, wilful, self-absorbed, adding to it a small hobby will be sufficient for Ning Ning to construct a character that has blood and meat. Didn't matter even if there was a slight difference. As the saying goes, a girl changes eighteen times between childhood and womanhood. Girls at this age would practically experience change daily—changing according to changes, going around and around.

“I find it extremely interesting to have those boys fight for my affection in front of me or in secret... Until one of them dies.” Ning Ning's upturned lips slowly drop, “Right before me, he was killed by my papa. Should I feel sad?”

She closed her eyes, and started pondering... pondering from Qu Ning'er's point of view.

Outside, Chen Junyan, who had been forced by Boss Qu to come over and apologize coincidentally overheard this line. He took a sharp breath, wishing he could answer in her stead: I would.

These two words could save his life, could save many, many others' lives.

“...I will not.” Then he heard her continue, “I'm not familiar with him, what was his name again... Little Sparrow or Little Magpie?”

Author has something to say:

If this was a system novel, there would be a system notice beep here.

Ning Ning: “What was his name again... Little Sparrow or Little Magpie?”

System notice: Chen Junyan's good opinion of you -10, -10, and -10...

Ning Ning: =A=! Stop o'hero!

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely and mossyrabbit

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 – Miss's Game

Miss has changed.

But how exactly has she changed?

“Do you guys have such a feeling?” During break time, a young man who served as a reserve member of the circus asked his companion, “Miss seems to have changed recently; Miss... seems to have become more humane.”

“Now that you’ve mentioned it... It seems to be so.”

“I originally thought that Miss favoured me alone, but from the looks of things, Miss dotes on all of us equally!”

Everyone was taking part of the heated discussion when suddenly they all zipped their mouths shut and looked in one direction.

Creak, The door opened and Chen Junyan walked in. Wherever he went, everyone’s eyes would be glued to him. Thus, it was only when he left the room did the conversations resume.

“This traitor,” one young lad expressed his disdain. “To think he had even dared to previously criticize us in a righteous manner, and now look at him. Someone that will betray a brother from the same dorm room without batting an eyelid isn’t a thing at all! *Ptui!*”

“Shh, speak softer, he hasn’t gone that far yet. Be careful, he might complain about you to the Master...”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

From the doorway, Chen Junyan softly mumbled to himself before leaving with his head lowered.

Betraying Little Freckle was a decision he made because there was no other choice. He had to do it otherwise he wouldn’t have had an opportunity to meet the young miss, nor have the chance to do what he was about to. He had succeeded, but at the same time, he had also pushed himself to the top of everyone’s hate list.

Every brother that shared a dorm room with him, had now made it a point to avoid him entirely. No one trusted him, and none were willing to talk. Wherever he went, he could feel gazes filled with

hatred shooting at him— penetrating his entire body.

“I’ve finally found you!” A tall man rushed towards him. “Why are you still holding onto the rice bowl? Put it down, put it down and come with me!”

Chen Junyan recognized him- he was Boss Qu’s right-hand man as well as a guard for the circus that was in charge of watching over reserves like himself. Someone that, under special circumstances, could decide the fate of the reserves. Chen Junyan was desperate to not slight him, and hastily asked, “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Something occurred in the boss’s home, quick, quick, quick!” The tall man snatched the rice bowl from Chen Junyan’s hands and threw it behind him, then dragged and hauled Chen Junyan out of the circus.

Am I going to meet Miss again? Chen Junyan sorrowfully realized that he actually felt happy deep down in his heart.

How could I!

He lowered his eyelids and said to himself: *don’t be such a joke, you aren’t like that bunch of idiots who like to deceive themselves. Ha ha, humane? They are all wrong and Miss is the true Hell. They have placed all of their hopes on her while she doesn’t even remember their names. Like her papa, she doesn’t even see us as human beings.*

And unfortunately, this young miss had become his one and only hope...

Chen Junyan followed the tall man while carrying complicated emotions in his heart. Right when they had reached the room door, he could hear sounds of chaos happening inside. Boss Qu’s voice traveled out from behind the door, “Ning’er... put the knife down, quick!”

What was going on? The both of them exchanged glances, and hurriedly pushed the door open to enter.

The table and chairs had been overturned, while things had been messily strewn everywhere. Boss Qu stood panting behind a round table with half of his moustache gone, and the other half dangling from his upper lip. He had one arm raised in a pacifying manner. “Put the knife down, calm down and let’s have a talk!”

Ning Ning cut off his escape path by standing at the opposite side of the table. In her raised hand was a shiny... razor.

“There’s nothing worth discussing!” She had one hand on her hip,

while the other pointed the razor at him. "It's too ugly to leave half a mustache, let me shave it off!"

Losing one side of his mustache was already too depressing, he could not lose the other side too! Boss Qu immediately pointed at the new people entering once he spotted them. "Practice with him first!"

The tall man's tiger-like body jolted, and almost as a conditioned reflex, covered his own sexy sideburns with a hand.

Ning Ning turned around to him, and quickly laughter traveled from behind the mask, "That's fine. You, come over!"

The tall man sent a desperate pleading gaze towards Boss Qu, who pretended to not have seen it. Eventually, because he couldn't go against his boss, he sat down in a chair reluctantly and shut his eyes tight in resignation to his fate. "Do it!"

Ning Ning's skill was truly non-existent, which ultimately robbed him entirely of his sexy sideburns, as well as one side of his eyebrows!

From the side, Boss Qu watched the scene unfold while being incredibly anxious. He pushed Chen Junyan forward without waiting for Ning Ning to be done. "Yes, not bad, but there's still room for improvement. Now, use him as practice."

Ning Ning took a slight pause in her busy work to glance at Chen Junyan, before rolling her eyes. "He doesn't have a beard!"

"Hair is the same!" Boss Qu arbitrarily insisted on his own view.

No, it's completely different!

An unwilling Chen Junyan was forced into the seat by Boss Qu.

He couldn't budge an inch and could only helplessly look at Ning Ning busying herself with her current victim, before walking over towards him while grinning. On the way, she waved the razor that had a bloodstain before his face, as if looking for a spot to shave.

Chen Junyan's gaze followed the razor despairingly. He only came to his senses after Ning Ning called his name for a second time.

He turned his head around, only to see her bending over and staring straight at him. "Are you very scared?"

"I'm not scared." Chen Junyan lied.

Your mouth may lie, but your body does not. He couldn't help clenching onto the armrest when Ning Ning moved the razor towards him. Because he used so much strength in the grip, veins bulging from

the back of his hand.

Ning Ning put the razor down, and turned around to speak with Boss Qu, “Forget it, he’s scared. He’ll run off halfway through the shave.”

“He won’t.” Boss Qu smiled sardonically as he lifted the rope in his hand.

One minute later, Chen Junyan was thoroughly fixed to the chair.

His arms were tied to the armrest, and his legs were tied together. After Boss Qu was done, he proudly turned to look at Ning Ning who was touched by his act. “Papa, don’t worry, I will definitely master my razor skills and then look for you.”

“...No need to rush, mastering your razor skills will not happen in a day or two after practicing on just one or two people.” Boss Qu turned around and began walking out. “Wait here, Papa will bring back more practice sources!”

“Boss! I’ll help!” The tall man ran out after Boss Qu, He must leave! Leave as soon as possible! He had already become a man without eyebrows or sideburns. If he continued to stay, there was no guarantee he could save his hair! Plus, there was no way that he could stop the young miss from getting what she wanted! He wasn’t even allowed to utter a single word against her because the moment he did so, Boss Qu would point a gun to his head and say, “Leave your head behind instead of your hair!”

Only Ning Ning, Chen Junyan, and Wang ma are left in the room.

Since Wang ma mostly stayed silent in the background, now was the right time for Ning Ning to exchange script lines with Chen Junyan.

In the following scene, there would only be ‘Qu Ning’er’ in this room and no ‘Ning Ning’; she would completely forget herself and thoroughly become Qu Ning’er.

“Alright, my Papa has left, you can tell me the truth now.” Ning Ning was just like a kid who had found her new toy. She held the razor upside down, then swayed it back and forth, before starting to giggle. “You are really that terrified of cutting your hair?”

Chen Junyan knew that he was unable to lie to her; he may be able to control his own mouth, but there was no way to stop the goosebumps from appearing on his neck as well as the sweat trickling down his forehead. To be frank, what he was afraid of wasn’t cutting

his hair, but the young miss. Boss Qu's cruelty could be somewhat predicted, but the young miss's cruelty? There was no way of knowing what she would do next.

However, he could not tell the truth. Thus, in an emergency, he quick-wittedly found himself a decent excuse.

"Miss," Chen Junyan spoke with a hoarse voice, "I'm not terrified of cutting my hair, but afraid that getting too close to you... will result in me becoming another Little Freckle."

"Little Freckle?" Ning Ning tilted her head. "Who's that?"

"It's that boy who performed the ball juggling a while ago." Scared she couldn't recall, Chen Junyan went silent for a moment, before explaining in another way, "...The boy that peeled off your mask."

"It's that boy who performed the ball juggling a while ago." Scared she couldn't recall, Chen Junyan went silent for a moment, before explaining in another way, "...The boy that peeled off your mask."

"Oh, him." Ning Ning finally understood, then crossed her arms in front of herself as she walked in circles around Chen Junyan. "Why, are the both of you very close?"

Who would even admit to being close to him when Boss Qu was itching to even whip his dead body? Chen Junyan took a quick glance at Wang ma in the corner; although she had disguised herself as a potted plant, he knew that every word he said and every single action of his would be reported back to Boss Qu.

[T/N: disguised as a potted plant meant that she seemed not to have much of a presence.]

Hence, he decisively shook his head. "We are only acquaintances."

"You said so for Li Xiulan too." Ning Ning suddenly halted in her steps and stood with a grin beside him. "You're acquaintances with everyone- do you not have even a single friend?"

...Chen Junyan felt as if he had fallen into a language trap, for just who wouldn't have a friend? Even a murderer or a chauvinist pig would have friends, and only untrustworthy people wouldn't have any...

"You poor little thing." Right at this moment where he was desperately attempting to find a way to crawl out of the trap, Ning Ning started giggling. "Oh wells, I'll be your friend."

Chen Junyan was stunned for a moment and thought he had heard

wrongly. "What?"

Ning Ning's expression immediately took a one-eighty, and she coldly said, "Why, you aren't willing?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Chen Junyan hurriedly answered, "I'm really honored."

Ning Ning switched back to being in her happy bubble again, and she pulled up a chair next to him and sat down before she threw the razor away. Then she propped her head up on her arms while facing him, her two legs kicking the floor in excitement.

"You're my first friend." She raised a finger to her lips in a 'shh' motion, then spoke in a feigned mysterious voice, "I'm also your first friend. Let's discuss hmm, just what should friends do between them?"

Chen Junyan remained silent for a short moment, before resolutely deciding to give it a try. He carefully said to her, "A friend wouldn't tie up their friend."

Ning Ning got up and walked off. When she came back, there were sharp scissors in her hand with which she, while grinning, cut the ropes binding him. Then, she looked at him with an expression of anticipation. "What else?"

Chen Junyan took the time he stretched out his limbs to do a scan of his surroundings. By this time, Wang ma had walked over silently and was glaring at him while pointing a dagger in warning for him to not do anything funny. He lowered his head, while his heart thumped anxiously. He abruptly lifted his head. "Next, you should free me. I have a home too, and I want to go back to have a look."

"No." Wang ma hit the nail on the head with his intentions. "Miss, he wants to escape."

With time not on his side, Chen Junyan had no intention of having a dispute with her, and there was only one person that could stop her...He looked directly into Ning Ning's eyes. "Miss, no, Ning'er. Will you help her, or will you help me?"

"I'll help you, I'll help you!!" Ning Ning grew excited, just like a child addicted to games who wouldn't let anyone disturb her play. At the sight of Wang ma poking her nose into their business, she resolutely pushed Wang ma away and even turned around to shout at Chen Junyan, "Alright, I've caught her. Go, quickly! Remember to come back soon!"

Chen Junyan sat solemnly on the chair for a second, then slowly

got up, and walked towards the door. As he took step after step, he started running as if he'd gone mad.

Halfway through though, he suddenly halted and looked back.

Ning Ning stood by the room entrance in the distance, with Wang ma wanting to leave but was blocked in her path. When Ning Ning saw him look back, she started waving to him frantically in happiness, as if bidding farewell.

Chen Junyan turned his head back; the main entrance was right before his eyes, but is the other side of the door... truly freedom?

Author has something to say:

A short play:

Is the other side of the door... truly freedom?

A head pokes out from outside the door, Boss Qu, "It's me~~~~~"hurhurhur

Chen Junyan, "F!"

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely and Mossyrabbit

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 11

Chapter 11- Exchanging lines

Watching his back silhouette disappear further and further away from her, Ning Ning let out a sigh of relief in her heart, *I can finally get my half-time break.*

As Qu Ning'er, this was a game of release\ing the turtle stuck in the tank out to the sea. As Ning Ning, she sincerely hoped he could successfully escape.

What's wrong? Why did he stop suddenly and not continue to leave?

Ning Ning furrowed her brows, it was with great difficulty that she had managed to draw Boss Qu away, act out 'Miss's game', and also stop Wang ma in her tracks. It was very difficult to create an opportunity for him to escape... Plus, all of this was accomplished under the foundation of not 'breaking character'! It was the first time her acting was so perfect. She was not sure she could do it a second time!

However, Chen Junyan stopped in his tracks right before the main door.

All it would take was a few more steps, but to him, it felt like a far away place.

Time passed... every second that passed meant he had a lesser chance of escaping. Ning Ning wasn't sure if he was anxious, but she was already having a panic attack!

The wind blew through the yard, lifting up the fallen leaves from the ground which then fell back onto his shoes of black cloth. Those shoes slowly changed direction, and heavy footsteps approached her.

"Miss." He took step after step towards her, then smiled. "I'm back."

Ning Ning stared hard at him, but could not decipher the meaning behind this smile, thus she asked in suspicion, "Why have you come back so quickly? Didn't you say that you were returning home to take a look?"

"I don't have any home." Chen Junyan's smile faltered. "Here is where my home is."

You're lying. Ning Ning was clear about the truth but had no intention of exposing him. She laughed and held onto his hand. "Then come home with me and let's play!"

Chen Junyan smilingly walked inside with her, and besides the slight pause when he was entering the room, he kept his composure well. Even when she had him play house with her, he displayed no sense of impatience and acted just like a warm big brother that had returned home to play with his own young sister.

With the great performance he was putting on, just how could Ning Ning, an actor, lose to him! Thus, all she could do was continue this act of playing house that lowered her IQ...

There were a few times where she was close to straight up asking, "You obviously knew there wouldn't be a good outcome waiting for you. However, why did you still decide to stay?"

However, she managed to hold herself back at the last moment.

Qu Ning'er would not ask this, Ning Ning thought. He is doing so well under the guise, that there's no way that Qu Ning'er, with her life experience, could see his suffering nor would she even extend a helping hand. He must be the one to make a request.

Ning Ning didn't believe that Chen Junyan was resigned to his fate, for if he were, there's no way he would be the male lead. Instead, he would just be an unimportant member of the circus who submitted to reality.

Patience, Ning Ning told herself. Wait patiently for him to make the request.

This was an episode of tug of war; Ning Ning calmly observed Chen Junyan, and he was doing the same. Chen Junyan was a very intelligent young man, and very quickly, he had completed his study of 'Qu Ning'er' and brought up his request.

"Miss..." She cut him off his speech.

Ning Ning told him with slight unhappiness, "Why are you calling me the way Wang ma does, aren't we friends? Call me Ning'er!"

"Ning'er." He swiftly changed his term of address, and at the same time, he cleverly swapped his tone of voice too. As a foundation of details, voice at many times was as important as the content of words spoken... Otherwise there wouldn't be that many voice maniacs in the world. He did so deliberately, purposely calling her miss in a formal voice first then switching to a sweet and exciting: Ning'er.

Behind the mask, Ning Ning could not help the excitement that overcame her, it's as if she was back on the set and was currently face to face with a strong co-actor. In order to not be shattered to smithereens by the other party; every strand of her concentration, every inch of her being was ready for battle!

"I'm here," she slowly replied. Then lowered her head to comb the doll's hair, stealing sideway glances at him from time to time and adjusting her sitting position so she could face him. She was using all her body language to hint: talk to me quickly, talk to me!

"Ning'er," Chen Junyan spoke gently, "I want to gift you with a present."

It's here! Ning Ning lifted her head to look at him while giggling. "What will you gift me?"

"Come and see it at the circus for yourself." Chen Junyan copied her previous action of lifting a finger to the lips in a shushing motion. As if sharing a secret, he said, "The circus will hold a grand public performance the day after tomorrow, where there will be many unusual sights and acts...and it will only be on that day. Don't you want to take a look?"

Incredible, he had figured out Qu Ning'er's personality so quickly. If he had directly cried for help, she might not bother for she was too self-centered and would only do things that were of interest. Hence, he took a turn, and invited her 'to play together'.

There was absolutely no chance of Qu Ning'er missing out on such an interesting game, nor would Ning Ning miss this opportunity to train herself. She immediately smiled heartily, "I want to."

However, she quickly furrowed her brows, and awkwardly told him, "But Papa will not let me go out..."

It would not be difficult for her at all. Since Chen Junyan had brought up this request, he naturally would have thought of a solution. As expected, he smilingly replied, "Have you forgotten? The day after tomorrow's your birthday!"

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment, *I've really forgotten...no, I had no idea at all that Qu Ning'er's birthday was the day after tomorrow!*

"If it was any other time, Master would definitely not agree, but the day after tomorrow is different." Chen Junyan moved that perfectly sculpted face before her in an extremely bewitching manner. "That day is your birthday, he will give you anything, and will agree to any of your requests..."

“Papa.”

Nighttime, Boss Qu had just come home, when Ning Ning pulled on his sleeves in a cutesy manner. “It’s my birthday the day after tomorrow, bring me out to play.”

Just as Chen Junyan predicted, Boss Qu hesitated, before patting her hand and asked warmly, “Where do you want to go?”

Ning Ning was slightly shocked. “You agreed? Aren’t you always unwilling to let me go out?”

“But the day after tomorrow’s your birthday,” Boss Qu laughed. “How can I bear to refuse your request on the day heaven bestowed you to me?”

Ning Ning suddenly felt a little touched; many others had spoken the same words to her, but only that line by her mom was real and the rest were lines as part of the script . *How great would it be if Boss Qu wasn’t a villain, that way I surely would give him a wholehearted hug right now.*

In addition, she felt a tiny pinch of dejectedness for it was considered her loss in the exchanging of lines this time. Not only had Chen Junyan seen through her personality and manner of behaviour, he was also thoroughly clear about Boss Qu’s. From there, he deduced the whole pace of the scene, thus she could not help but follow his pace, just like how he had had no choice but to follow the pace of ‘Miss’s Game’ the previous time.

Just what exactly does he want me to see? With the indignation of losing, Ning Ning started to ponder with all her might. *What does he intend to do?*

He was currently making preparations.

In the dead of the night, under the same star constellations, Ning Ning’s home was lit up with warm yellow light and the charcoal fire provided warmth. The father and daughter duo sat around a table filled with all kinds of delicious delicacies while laughing. Meanwhile, the circus was filled with a gloomy and cold atmosphere; rats and cockroaches crawled around the room. One person was truly too hungry, so they reached out for a cockroach and shoved it straight into their mouth. *Crunch...*

“Get up.” Chen Junyan shook the people around him awake, the other parties drowsily open their sleepy eyes, but the moment they saw it was him, they decided on ignoring. However, before they had a

chance to turn their backs, Chen Junyan quickly spoke, "I have something to say regarding Miss."

Thus, everyone was wide awake and had their gazes fixated on him as they lay under their blankets.

"The day after tomorrow will be Miss's birthday." Chen Junyan knew they had no patience to listen to any nonsense, hence he went right to the point. "She will come and watch the circus show."

Everyone looked at each other, seemingly seeing the excitement in the other's eyes. Some had already started plotting, *Even if bathing in cold water on that day will get me sick, I must scrub myself squeaky clean, so I can shine brighter than everyone else and Miss will only have eyes for me.*

"Don't you all think this is a great opportunity?" Chen Junyan looked into the eyes of every person, but then the following words he said were shocking. "A great opportunity to let Miss find out the truth."

Everyone was shocked to the core, the timid ones already had fear plastered onto their faces. After a brief silence, someone spoke with a lowered voice, "Master will kill us!"

"Of course we can't do this in the open." Chen Junyan lowered his voice, calm but powerful, he spoke with confidence, "Each one of you will be in charge of a task."

He looked towards a young lad. "You shall say you have diarrhea, but the guard won't let you go alone. You squat for awhile in the toilet as he waits for you outside, delaying time for the others."

Then he looked towards another lad. "You have a wide range of vision while walking on stilts, and will be the most suitable to be the informer. Come up with three hand signals that aren't too complicated: Safe, unsafe and action!"

He gave out orders one after the other, each one something that was in the capability of the other party— they could barely do it, but would be able to do it well. Not only had he familiarised himself entirely with Qu Ning'er and Boss Qu, but also everyone's personality and manner of behaviour.

Being able to do it was one thing, but whether they were willing to do it was another. Someone snorted coldly, and with arms crossed, glared at him. "Easily said, but why should we help you? What do we gain from doing this?"

“Of course you’ll benefit from it.” Chen Junyan recognized him, he was the young lad that said the young miss had gotten more humane. Chen Junyan smiled, for he knew how to convince them. “Also, you’re not helping me, but us. Haven’t you always wanted to be at Miss’s side? If you don’t let her know how pitiful you are, why would she pity you and bring you under her wing? Think carefully.”

The young lad wavered, however, he was still hesitant. “It will be good if this succeeds, but if it fails there will be nothing left, we’ll even be punished...”

“As long as we aren’t discovered, they will be no punishment.” Chen Junyan tried to play down the risks involved. Then, he suddenly stood up from the ground, which gathered everyone’s gaze to him. “What’s more, the most dangerous task will be done by me...I’ll bring Miss to see the true ‘circus’.”

Everyone looked at each other, then suddenly, a huge debate broke out. Only when the guard rushed over and harshly banged on their room door did they quiet down and shrink back into their blankets.

Although they were lying down, everyone’s eyes were wide open.

“Oi.”

Chen Junyan turned over, to see a young lad slowly extending a fist towards him.

They did not dare let out a noise with the guard patrolling outside, let alone discuss this issue, however, everything to be said was already held in this fist. Chen Junyan smiled, and bumped his fist to theirs.

Beside him, one after the other, fists started extending out of blankets.

Translated by: Ruisi

Edited by: Ely and Mossyrabbit

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 12

12: Republic Circus

Two days later.

Ning Ning walked out of the front door for the first time, taking in the scenery, broadening her horizons. She took a breath and inexplicably felt a little nervous. Should she take her next step with her left or right foot? Boss Qu who was in front of her turned around, reached out a hand towards her and said with a smile, "Come."

Ning Ning ran over with a smile and placed her tiny hand in his bigger palm.

"It's crowded, keep close." Boss Qu said while holding her hand tightly, "Don't get lost."

It was almost the New Year. The streets were filled with the aroma of New Year's delicacies, stalls that sold New Year's delicacies lined the streets. The wide selection of poultry and fish, condiments, dried food and snacks drew a huge crowd. Ning Ning stood in front of a roasted duck stall, she was rooted to the spot. "I'll get you one on the way back" Boss Qu remarked, "you won't be able to eat it right now even if I were to buy it. It will only get cold." Boss Qu gave her permission to come out and play, but forbade her from taking off her mask in front of anyone.

"Alright, I'm not that hungry right now anyway." Ning Ning averted her gaze from the oil-glazed roasted duck dejectedly and said, "Let's go watch the performance, we'll come back for it afterwards."

The two of them continued to walk, a passerby took notice and started sniggering at Ning Ning's mask. Ning Ning paid no attention to it, but Boss Qu tripped the passerby as they were walking past each other, then apathetically stepped on his hand and broke it. Just as the passerby was about to get angry, Boss Qu lowered his head and coldly uttered, "I initially wanted to step on your neck."

The passerby was stunned. He had a glimpse of the gun on Boss Qu's waist and immediately ran away with his tail tucked between his legs.

After the passerby left, Boss Qu brought Ning Ning to a stall that sold masks. He bought a snowy white mask and put it on himself.

"Alright, now we are the same." He said while laughing from behind the mask.

Ning Ning giggled. She reached out and took his mask off, then put it back on again. After she had played around for a while, a noise behind her caught her attention. She turned her head towards the noise to look, a group of people was approaching from a short distance away. A lion dance was leading the pack, in the middle was a clown that was juggling balls, they were accompanied by the sounds of percussion. Then a teenager on stilts appeared, he was shouting as he was walking about, "Circus Tour performance, last show! Last show! Don't miss out!"

"Ah! It's Long Er!" Ning Ning recognised the teenager on stilts, she smiled and waved at him from the crowd.

Long Er looked over seemingly saw her, but he then waved at the crowd and made a weird hand sign like he did not see her. After the troupe left, Ning Ning turned back as she smiled, but was taken aback and asked, "Papa, what's wrong?"

Boss Qu stopped staring, smiled and told her, "It's nothing, let's go."

Ning Ning immediately understood, the only reason he would show such an expression would be that he discovered that something was amiss. She turned and looked towards the direction where Long Er left and thought to herself, "Chen Jun Yan, what are you up to?"

She grinned. As they passed by the entrance of the circus, she stopped and refused to move. "I want to watch too." She said while pointing at the seemingly non-stop crowd of people walking in and out of the circus entrance.

You watch it everyday, aren't you sick of it?" Boss Qu replied.

"This is different." Said Ning Ning, "Watching alone is different from watching along with the crowd."

Boss Qu assumed that she had been alone for too long and wanted to experience what it was like to be among the hustle and bustle. He shook his head impatiently and said, "Papa will tell you what's different, you will be standing still but would be moved 10 meters in an instant, look." Both of them looked over, an innocent passerby was accidentally swept into the crowd through the entrance out of sight, he could only shout out, "I was only out to get soy sauce!!"

Peak hour traffic.....

This scary phrase flashed across the mind of Ning Ning.

Why do humans like to torture each other! Ning Ning boldly closed her eyes, let go of Boss Qu's hand without warning and ran towards the crowd all alone. She was swept away in an instant, leaving a parting remark, "I don't care, I want to watch it!"

"Ning'eri" Boss Qu shouted from behind as he hurriedly tried to catch up..

As people pushed and shoved among themselves, Ning Ning felt as if she had moved 10 meters in an instant and had arrived at the entrance. The doorman held up his hands to stop her, "2 copper coins per entry"

Ning Ning impatiently took out a silver yuan and handed it over. "Keep the change.

The doorman stepped out of the way with a huge grin after accepting the payment. Upon entering, she saw two tents erected in front of her. The tent on the left was grey with patches while the tent on the right had a lot of pictures sewn on. There were pictures of a snake woman, a rat man, a two-headed man and more.

Ning Ning wanted to take a look at the tent on the right, but there were two doormen standing guard. She recognised one of them, because he was the one whom she had shaved clean, he should know her too. Would he stop her if she were to walk over?

As she was hesitating, a circus teen ran over while holding his stomach. He said something to the hairless doorman out of her earshot, and they left together, leaving the unfamiliar watchman all alone.

A few audience passed by Ning Ning, she decided to follow them. the doorman raised his hand and stopped them. Ten copper coins per entry."

"That's so expensive!" The group of audience exclaimed, some of them were unwilling to fork out this much money. One of them asked, "What's Inside? Does a sword swallower or a fire spitter worth this much money?"

"Of course It's worth it," the watchman said, "a rat man, a singing dog, a white bone demon, they are all rare species that you cannot see anywhere else! Also, It's the last day today, if you don't have a look now, you won't have another chance tomorrow!"

A few people started to discuss among themselves hesitantly. Ning Ning was worried that the hairless doorman would come back early, so she pushed her way through the group of people and went into the

tent after paying for the entrance fee.

She peeled away the thick flap of the tent to unvell a whole other world. A curved shaped stage greeted her, there were a few seats in front of it. Perhaps the tickets were too expensive, there weren't many audience. Some of them refused to be seated, Instead choosing to stand around the stage.

There was a dog on the stage, It was not an expensive breed nor was it cute. Ning Ning was curious as to how this could be entertaining. At that moment the dog looked up. It stared into her eyes with its humanlike eyes and began to sing, "Where did this feeling come from, It's unrequited but it still runs deep, the living can die, the dead can live."

Ning Ning was so shocked that she took a few steps back and bumped into someone's chest

"Miss, Chen Jun Yan's voice rang out behind her, "follow me."

He pulled her to the most inconspicuous seat and sat down, they were hidden due to the customers that surrounded them.

"Look." Chen Jun Yan was seated beside her, he looked up to the stage and said, "This is the real circus."

The curtains were raised and the performers appeared on stage. First up was the rat man. Although he had the stature of a human, he had fur and a rat tail. He reached his arms out and allowed the audience to have a touch. Everyone who touched him were astonished. Next up was the big headed child. Her head was as big as a jar, but her limbs were as skinny as matchsticks and as weak as cotton. She had to have two girls helped her move around as she couldn't do so herself. After that there were the legless man, the multi-armed man, the snake woman, all of them were introduced by a song sang by the dog. It was a gathering of demons, It felt weird and Interesting at the same time.

"Miss," Chen Jun Yan asked, "do you believe that a singing dog exists in this world?" On stage, the dog sang with a youthful voice, "Dog barking dismally, a chill wind blows, unmarked graves piling up, a female ghost worships the moon Accompanied by his singing, the curtain drew back, and a familiar figure appeared on stage..

It was Li Xiu Lan.

She was wearing a flower-patterned robe today, looking her part of a performer: Her gaze fell upon Ning Ning and Chen Jun Yan among the audience, the look in her eyes changed. She smiled and tossed her

flowing sleeves, they fluttered to the ground like waves. Beneath the sleeves, after the armpits, the arms had neither flesh nor blood, all that was left were bones. Ning Ning turned pale and felt sick.

"It doesn't exist." Chen Jun Yan whispered, "He was human. After he was kidnapped, his skin was corroded with medicine, then they stuck the skin of a dog on him with ash and medicine. He was then raised together with the dogs. After he had dog's milk and grew dog's fur, he was no longer human, but the circus' singing dog."

He suddenly turned around, stared at Ning Ning and said, "Didn't you ask me what I was afraid of? This is it. I'm afraid that one day, I will end up like her, suffering the same fate as Li Xiu Lan. Miss, your father is...."

"Seal the door!" Boss Qu suddenly entered the tent accompanied by a group of guards. A few youths were tied up and tossed to the ground, including Long Er who acted as the Informant on stilts, and Gou Dan who lured the doorman away with a fake stomach ache. One of them immediately shouted fearfully, "It wasn't me! It wasn't me! Chen Jun Yan made me do it!"

Boss Qu didn't bother to look at the youth, he was scanning the anxious crowd and stopped at Ning Ning..

Today the circus needs to handle internal affairs." He barked his orders as he was walking towards Ning Ning, "Old Zhang, give the customers refunds!"

The customers were ushered out as the refunds were given out.

After everyone left, only Boss Qu, Ning Ning, Chen Jun Yan, a group of pale-faced youths and the performers on stage were left in the tent.

Boss Qu arrived in front of Ning Ning, he reached his hands out intending to pull her towards him. But as his hands touched her shoulders, Ning Ning reflexively pushed him away. She didn't use much force, but Boss Qu took a couple of steps back, looking at her in consternation."Ning Ning looked at him: Whether it was her as Qu Ning'er or Ning Ning, their feelings were the same at that moment. She had suffered a huge emotional trauma, and so she looked at Boss Qu with the same expression that everyone else looked at him with, a look filled with fear.

Boss Qu looked at her dazedly, his eyes were filled with pain and immense disappointment along with traces of tears. But his subordinates were behind him, the people of the circus were behind

him, he could not cry in front of them. So he closed his eyes, and as he reopened them those immense pain and disappointment had transformed into massive rage. He looked at Chen Jun Yan, gritted his teeth as he articulated word by word, "Chen Jun Yan, you did this! You'll have to be punished, all of you will have to be punished!"

Author's Note:Small TheaterBoss Qu drew his gun and pointed it at the author then coldly questioned, "Why is my circus nameless?"Author walled, "I can't think of one!! I wanted to name it Qu Family Circus, thought it looked like Ru family at a glance....."Bang!"Also pasting yesterday's best comment y praise users Ma Que Que and rainMa Que Que: "Chen Jun Yan: What's our slogan? Cause trouble! Cause trouble! Cause trouble!"rain: It's over, you turned my handsome male lead into a handsome hamster.

Chapter 13

13: The Initial Goodwill

Boss Qu was enraged.

He didn't care if this would affect the operations of the circus, he stubbornly wanted all the reserves to graduate prematurely and become the stars of the other tent.

"It's all your fault!" Boss Qu viciously declared while grabbing onto the hair of Chen Jun Yan in the torture chamber. "Be it you or Long Er, none of you are getting away! Everyone is picking a wooden doll from the box today!"

Chen Jun Yan's face was full of bruises, he slowly opened his eyes, squinting, and asked him with a smile, "Is Miss terrified of you now?" Boss Qu's face twitched, then he laughed.

"You're good, very good." He loosened his grip, Chen Jun Yan grunted as he fell to the ground. Boss Qu looked down on him and laughed, "You're atrocious, you're even worse than me. If not for what happened today, I would have kept you, nurtured you, because you definitely could survive very well in this abhorrent world."

After he was done saying his piece he picked up the wooden box that was on the table, he was stupefied for an unknown reason. After he got his senses back, he put down the wooden box and told Chen Jun Yan without looking at him, "You have to give thanks to Miss, this is an opportunity she begged me to give you. You can pick your wooden doll, or let me choose, will use the most cruel method to transform all of you."

The door opened and a single ray of moonlight shined on the face of Chen Jun Yan: It slowly shrunk and disappeared from his face as the door to the room was sealed shut.

Outside of the door, Boss Qu looked at the night sky and waved off his servants. He held lantern as he walked home alone, the snow made a crunching sound as he stepped on them, he braced the wind and snow before he entered his home. He smiled as he delivered the words he painstakingly came up with on the way back, "Ning'er, didn't you think my facial hair is an eyesore? Come, let Papa have a taste of your shaving skills"

He cherished his facial hair a lot, but it was nothing compared to his daughter. Ning Ning looked at him with a complicated expression, she didn't know how to answer him, because..... she had once again failed to sustain her role as Qu Ning'er. No, the situation was even worse, she had been completely torn apart from Qu Ning'er.

Qu Ning'er's indifference was conflicting with Ning Ning's conscience. Ning Ning's conscience was condemning Qu Ning'er's indifference. In the end, Indifference couldn't beat conscience, which was why it had become another tragic play. The person standing in the room now was Ning Ning, the young actress who could no longer portray Qu Ning'er.

Looking at Boss Qu being dazed for a short while, Ning Ning grabbed the razor and walked towards him.

Wang Ma silently lit a candle by the side. The light from the flickering flame shone in his eyes, dyeing his eyes a warm golden colour. When the razor shaved the final strands of facial hair, it revealed a face that looked like it belonged to someone between a young adult and a middle aged man. It was cold and gentle, cruel and determined, it was even a little handsome. Stern yet beautiful, like a razor in a snowy night

He suddenly spoke, "I know what you did."

Ning Ning's hand that was holding the razor trembled..

Blood was flowing from the small cut, but Boss Qu was unbothered by it. He slowly faced towards Ning Ning, smiling gently yet begrudgingly, "I know that you rigged what's in the box".

At the same time, in the torture chamber, Chen Jun Yan laid flat on the ground, thinking about Miss Qu. He thought of what Miss said just before she left.

She came by a little earlier than Boss Qu. She got rid of all the guards with her usual arrogance, cut the rope that was tying his hands and feet with a sharp pair of scissors then pointed outside the door and said, "Go."

In a daze, it felt like he was back to that afternoon, to the game among friends.

"Where would I go?" Chen Jun Yan suddenly smiled.

"Go home of course." Miss said rightfully.

"I don't know where my house is at the moment, I was kidnapped when I was 10. Chen Jun Yan laid on the floor unmovingly, staring at

the ceiling above him without blinking, "I will leave when the opportunity arises. I would have left last time if I wanted to leave, but I did not. Because I hate Boss Qu, I hate this circus, and hate you. If all of you don't receive retribution, there would be no point in me leaving this place!"

Though he had words full of righteousness, his heart was saying, 'Help me, I can't die yet!' He couldn't ask for help directly, because everyone admired a person who have no regards for life and death. But he couldn't go overboard, if he was too stubborn he wouldn't get what he wanted.

If life was a movie or a play, then the act right now was the most important in Chen Jun Yan's life. Life or death depended on whether he could touch Miss's heart. Moreover, does freedom truly lie outside the door?" Since they couldn't see each other well in the dark, the thing that could touch her was his voice. Chen Jun Yan allowed his voice to sound weak.

Miss fell silent, then her voice rang out from the darkness: "I know you are acting in front of me."

Chen Jun Yan choked on his words. All of a sudden he felt cold sweat, he even shivered a little, his entire body was enveloped by a fear that was infinitely close to the fear of death.

"But I will save you," Miss laughed bitterly, she said with an attitude that was somewhat like her but yet not, "I will save all of you."

After a brief moment, Chen Jun Yan laughed so hard he trembled. "I don't believe you, Miss." The flashback ended, Chen Jun Yan then asked himself, did he really not believe her? If that was the case, what was he waiting for? What was he disappointed for? What was he hating on?

"You said you would definitely come to my rescue me, but you didn't turn up." Chen Jun Yan mumbled, "It's a good thing didn't believe you. In this hell, there are no good people, no friends, no trust, there's nothing..."

Boss Qu walked out leaving the wooden box on the table. Chen Jun Yan laughed sarcastically.

"You thought by leaving this behind and letting me choose my own wooden puppet counts as a compensation to me? Miss..... You are so cute yet detestable.

As he was finishing his previous sentence, the door to the torture

chamber was busted through with a bang.

Moonlight shined on his face again, Chen Jun Yan smiled a vengeful smile.

"Found him!"

"Quickly Inform Miss LI Xiu Lan"

"Oh my, he's badly Injured, quickly get a physician"

A group of people in police uniforms rushed in, their shadows flashed across the face of Chen Jun Yan. He began to laugh uncontrollably.

"All of you are finally here!" He said while laughing. The people around him gave him weird looks, he teared up laughing so much. "Miss, you really thought brought you to the circus to see the truth?"

The simple and naive Miss, the proud and stubborn Miss, the cute but detestable Miss... He had never believed her. How could he place his hopes on her? LI Xiu Lan, the third daughter of the military LI family was whom he placed his hopes on. When Miss ran off from Boss Qu's side) and thus prompted Boss Qu to mobilise everyone to look for her, he sneaked out of the circus and sent a letter along with a token from LI Xiu Lan to the police station. Verifying LI Xiu Lan's Identity took some time, good thing it was still done in time. The final winner was him, he was the one with the last laugh.

"You can't escape just by walking out the front door." After he finished laughing, Chen Jun Yan mumbled, "Only by destroying the circus, only by destroying all of you, will be able to obtain freedom..."

For this he used everyone, even himself.

After they had confirmed Chen Jun Yan's safety, a policeman was assigned to look after him. As the rest were about to leave, Chen Jun Yan asked, "Where are you going? What happened to the people of the circus? Have you caught Boss Qu and his daughter?"

The policeman answered politely, "We are going over now."

"....go, don't let the guilty escape." Chen Jun Yan said, "Right, leave the door open; I want some light."

The policemen left without closing the door, the winds of winter blew in, the policeman that stayed behind folded his arms in an attempt to keep himself warm. Chen Jun Yan's lips turned pale because of the cold, but he was unwilling to close the door. He greedily breathed in the air of freedom, gazing at the moonlight outside the

door.

Not long later, a physician carrying a case of medicine arrived and said with surprise, "It's so cold inside, why was the door left open?"

He closed the door then lit a candle he took out from the medicine case, the flame swayed and occasionally crackled. The physician applied the medicine on Chen Jun Yan and bandaged him then finally said, "You went cold and hungry for many years, your constitution is already very weak, plus you are too stressed out, if you don't take care of your body while you are still young, you will have a hard time when you are old. Right, this place is no longer inhabitable."

Before Chen Jun Yan could say anything, the police that was watching over him said, "Miss Li Xiu Lan has requested that after we find you, we are to quickly escort you over to meet her."

Chen Jun Yan nodded, the police supported him as he got up. As they were about to walk through the door, he suddenly said, "Wait."

He stopped in his tracks, looked at the wooden box on the table with a complicated expression. The wooden box that once gave him countless nightmares was now left behind on the table like a worthless junk. After a while, the policeman beside him got impatient and asked, "Can we go now?"

Let's go. Chen Jun Yan replied. He thought to himself, I'll keep it as a souvenir. He reached over and grabbed the wooden box from the table. He was stunned the moment he picked it up, Why Is it so light?

He wrenched himself free of the policeman's hand and quickly opened the box.

The armless wooden doll, the legless wooden doll, the singing dog wooden doll, the mouse man wooden doll, the big headed child wooden doll... all of the wooden dolls were gone.

The moonlight shone on the content of the box. Inside was a stack of paper. Chen Jun Yan picked up a piece of paper, there was a squiggly word which looked like it was written by a child that just began to learn to write on it: human..

Chen Jun Yan's fingers slowly began to tremble. He felt as if he was looking at Miss when he looked at the word. Her figure accompanied by the afternoon sun appeared in front of his eyes.

That day, she bothered him again, asking him to play the childish friend game with her. "I don't know how to write, but it's alright." That was an extremely lazy and warm afternoon, she sat under the

translucent screen, her hair seemed gold as they were bathing in the sunlight, it made her looked like the blonde doll she held in her arms. She laughed, and with a voice that's as lazy and fluffy as the afternoon sun said, "I am beautiful and rich anyway, I'll just look for a husband who can write. Oh, by the way, can you write?"

She always thought too little. He, on the other hand, always thought too much. He dissected her words twice over before answering cautiously, "I can."

"That won't do." Miss's expression Immediately changed, "We are friends, have to know what you know, teach me!"

Writing materials were then brought out. He deliberated long and hard over the choice of word to be taught to her, before he finally began to write. "What word is this?" Miss asked as she huddled beside him

"Human." He replied.

Human. The most precious being on heaven and earth: Humans should not live like weeds, they also should not live wearing beast skins over them.

He wanted to be a human and hoped that she was one.

Chen Jun Yan dropped the wooden box. All the pieces of paper with human written on them fluttered and surrounded him like children. Chen Jun Yan took two deep breaths then rushed out of the door..

Chapter 14

14: The Last Curse

"I know what you did with the box."

Boss Qu grasped Ning Ning's hand once he said that, although Ning Ning balled her hand into a fist tightly and refused to look at him, he still managed to easily loosen her fingers.

There was a fresh wound on the tip of her finger, it looked like an accidental cut.

"In the beginning, you wanted to sculpt a few dozen wooden dolls then switched them with the ones in the box right?" Boss Qu asked while touching her fingertip.

Ning Ning hissed from the pain, then she answered honestly, "Yes."

"The box is too light." Boss Qu said, "What's inside?"

"Paper." Ning Ning replied..

"What's written on them?" Boss Qu asked.

Ning Ning remained silent for a while, then replied in a very quiet voice, "Human".

Boss Qu forced out a helpless laugh...

"Look" He opened her palm and let her look at the Injury on her hand, "Kindness never begets kindness, In the end you will be the one who gets hurt."

As he finished his sentence, he brought her finger to his mouth and blew on it as if he was coaxing a child. He asked gently, "Does it still hurt?"

Ning Ning shook her head and asked, "Are you going to continue?"

"...I need the money." Boss Qu said after a pause, "Your clothes, your servants, the physicians that treat you, and your future husband, all of these requires money. I want to buy you the most handsome man, one who will obey you....."

"I don't want them!" Ning Ning shouted suddenly, "Papa! Stop doing these kind of things, you will receive retribution!"

Boss Qu laughed coldly, "I have never been afraid of retribution....."

"What if it fell on me?" Ning Ning interrupted him.

Boss Qu shivered.

"Papa... Ning Ning suddenly started to tear up. In this moment, she had already lost track as to whether she was speaking as Ning Ning or Ning Qu'er, "Stop this. I don't want nice clothes, don't want servants, neither do want medicine. Let them go."

The thing Boss Qu couldn't bear to see the most was for her to cry. He anxiously dried her tears with his sleeve wrapped around his fingers. I don't want to let them go, especially Chen Jun Yan that little bastard."

Ning Ning's heart sank abruptly, but then Boss Qu flashed an extremely loving smile and said, "But today is your birthday."

"Papa" Ning Ning looked at him with surprise.

"I hate this world, this world has never been good to me, I also won't be kind to this world Boss Qu gently touched her face, "But today Is your birthday, it's the only day the accursed Heaven ever showed me kindness. If If this is your wish...

He knitted his eyebrows and pursed his lips; looking as if he was making an extremely difficult choice.

"....then I can let them go. He finally unfurled his eyebrows, then gently kissed her on the forehead, "I'll treat this as...a birthday gift for you."

"Papa." Ning Ning closed her eyes, tears flowed down her cheek. She reached out and hugged him. Both Ning Ning and Ning Qu'er within her called out as one, "Papa."

Ning Ning never had a father, but if she had one, a father should be like this right? If God could give her a father, it should be him.....

Neither Boss Qu nor Ning Ning said another word. The winter winds whistled outside the window, on the other side of the window the two of them snuggled together. Like sunlight enfolding the snow, the final crack between Ning Ning and Ning Qu'er melted away with the hug. She hugged Boss Qu tightly and said, "Papa... Thank you..."

Thanks to this world, for allowing the talentless me to be born in it, for allowing me to come into this movie.

"Thank you...."Ning Ning cried, "thank you..., for loving me this much"

Thanks to this world, for allowing me to meet you. It wouldn't matter even if I could not return. You care for me while I was young, care for me when you grow old, will accompany and live with you. No matter what happens next, we will face it together, solve it together, atone for the crimes together.....

Suddenly someone busted through the door to the room: Snow and wind poured in, pairs of military boots stepped in from the outside.

By the time Chen Jun Yan rushed over to the Qu house, the scene was already a mess. Cabinets were open, the qipaos and dresses were taken out and tossed on the ground, they had black shoe prints on them. Wang Ma knelt on the ground, slowly picking up the clothes, cleaning up the aftermath.

He walked over and asked, "Where did they go?"

Wang Ma muttered with her head down/lowered, "One yuan, two yuan....."

Chen Jun Yan knelt down, "What are you counting?"

"Counting funeral funds." Wang Ma answered without raising her head, "Need to collect money for two funerals, one for Master, one for Miss." At this moment the policeman who was panting finally caught up, Chen Jun Yan got up and grabbed him, "Where did you bring them to?"

"To Li Xiu Lan." The Policeman replied while panting.

"Bring me there quickly!" Chen Jun Yan went outside hurriedly while dragging him along. The cold winds of the snowy night couldn't stop him, he hoped that he could get there in time. With much difficulty, he arrived at the courtyard of where Li Xiu Lan was currently staying. Just as he pushed his way through the crowd of people, he heard someone mocking from the inside, "Monster!"

Who are they calling a monster? Is it me?

Ning Ning sat on the floor unkempt, she looked at the people around her blankly.

Her mask had long been removed.

When it was being removed, Li Xiu Lan was jeering beside her, "I heard that the man who sees your face has to marry you. Now that so many people are going to see your face, are you going to marry all of them?"

Amidst the laughter, Ning Ning's mask was removed. In that

moment, the sounds of laughter suddenly became sounds of terror. LI Xiu Lan was stunned as well, she then laughed loudly: "This is the most beautiful person in the world?"

What was presented to the crowd was not just an ugly face

It was clearly a monster.

She had the facial features of a human, but none of them were aligned. Her eyes were of different height, her nose was to the left, mouth to the right. The small inconsistencies added together formed a huge inconsistency, which made her face looked like an abstract painting of Picasso. One glance was enough to make people laugh.

"Pfft!" A person started to laugh, the laughter started to spread, they surrounded her and everyone began laughing one after another as if they were watching a circus show on deformed creatures.

".....Shut up!" Boss Qu slowly lifted his head and looked at them maliciously, "No laughing allowed, I'll kill anyone who laughs!"

Yesterday his wrath could scare everyone, but it didn't work today, because he was tied up on a stake. The members of the circus were throwing firewood below his feet. When they were done, Li Xiu Lan ordered an attendant to light up a match and toss it on the firewood. The fire lit up the courtyard and inched towards Boss Qu..

This was not enough, before he burned to death he had to have a taste of the worst pain on Earth.

That was to have the thing he loved most be destroyed.

They beat Ning Ning up in front of him, mocking, cursing and spitting on her. Suddenly someone suggested, "Where's the wooden box, let her pick a wooden doll!"

"That's a good Idea." LI Xiu Lan's eyes lit up, she asked the attendant beside her, "Where's the wooden box? Did you see a wooden box filled with wooden dolls?"

"No," said the attendant, "I'll go look for it.

Li Xiu Lan looked at the fire on Boss Qu and furrowed her brows, "There won't be enough time."

She suddenly laughed cruelly and said to the audience, "We will vote, what will we make her into?"

"Shut up! Stop It!" Boss Qu shouted at her, "Come at me, my daughter has done nothing bad, who are you to do this to her?"

The crowd ignored him. One could say this was exactly how they wanted to see him. They started a heated debate.

"Singing dog!"

"White bone demon!"

"Legless man!"

"Mouseman!"

"Big headed doll.....oh this won't work, she's overweight."

Ning Ning laid on the floor and cried. She suddenly turned over and looked at the person who suggested the big headed doll and said, "LI Xiu Lan has every right to hate me, why do you hate me? I didn't hurt you, I even gave you food, I gave you new clothes. You, you thanked me and said you would repay me in the future."

The reserved youth she addressed looked awkward. For the sake of drawing a line between them, he hurriedly gave her a kick "You thought a few snacks would win me over! My family is in the shipping business, I had bird's nest and shark's fin when I was young, I could discard a bowl of it for every bowl had.....

"Enough!" Chen Jun Yan rushed over after pushing through the crowd, he pulled the youth away then bent over and helped Ning Ning up. Ning Ning was dizzy from the beating, the Ning Qu'er within her didn't understand why this was happening. The Ning Ning in her understood, but it was hard to bear all of it. She was helped up with a face full of blood. She turned around and realised she was looking at Chen Jun Yan's face, she screamed and pushed him away as if she was stung by a scorpion.

Chen Jun Yan took a few steps back from being pushed, he bitterly reached out to her once again, "Don't be scared, I won't hurt you, trust me."

Ning Ning looked at him while trembling, her eyes said that she didn't believe him. In the snowy courtyard, she retreated step by step, getting further away from him, moving towards the fire behind her.

"Ning'er!" Chen Jun Yan walked a few steps towards her, "Trust me!"

Ning Ning turned around and jumped into Boss Qu's arms.

Flames engulfed her..

"Papa!" She cried mournfully.

"I am so sad! They said I'm ugly!"

"It hurts so much! They beat me up!"

"It's so hot! It's scalding! Papa, save me, papa!"

Boss Qu who was tied to the stake suddenly struggled violently. The fire had been burning for too long, It had burned the rope that had tied his hands. He suddenly broke free from the ropes, but the first thing he did was not to get out of the fire. He snapped Ning Ning's neck with tears in his eyes.

The mournful wailing stopped. Ning Ning fell into his arms. Her ugly face rested on his shoulders, as if she were a child who had finally found a peaceful place to sleep. Boss Qu hugged her. He had never begged nor scream while he was being burned. The boss who had shown no fear of death suddenly exploded with a long, hoarse, sad howl, "AAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

He looked up at the crowd after he stopped howling.

Everyone was scared by his expression and took a step back. Those who had less guts took a couple or three steps back... When they saw him stood up and walked towards them step by step with Ning Ning in his arms, everyone turned tall and ran. Li Xlu Lan almost ran, but she very quickly remembered that she was not her past self from the circus. She was no longer alone, she had the backing of the UI family, she didn't need to be afraid of anyone. She composed herself and ordered the servants beside her, "Shoot him!"

Her attendants raised their guns, bullets were whizzing towards Boss Qui One hit his abdomen, one hit his knee, Boss Qu fell to the ground. With Ning Ning in one arm and supporting himself with the other, he got up from the snowy ground covered with fire. He scanned everyone on site before finally fixing his gaze on Chen Jun Yan:

"I won't die." Even though flames continued burning his body, the fires of hatred burned even more fiercely in his eyes. He told Chen Jun Yan word by word, "Even if I die, I won't drink Meng Po's soup. I will remember what you look like. If I get reincarnated as a dog I will bite off your neck. If I get reincarnated as a bird I will peck your eyes out. Life after life, in an unbreakable cycle, this hatred will last beyond death!!!"

Chapter 15

15: This Hatred Will Last Beyond Death

Ning Ning abruptly took a breath and opened her eyes.

There was not a soul in sight in the cinema, the hot drink in her hand was still steaming. On the movie screen in front of her, the story was just beginning.

"Xiu Lan," Chen Jun Yan said, "I have a plan. If it succeeded both of us would be saved."

"What plan?" Li Xiu Lan asked.

"I have inquired around and confirmed that the Circus Leader has a daughter." Chen Jun Yan added, "He is selecting people to go over to perform tricks for her. We'll go together then you'll need to assault her."

Li Xiu Lan was startled and frantically shook her head. "I'm not doing it! The leader will kill me!"

"The circus is short of manpower, he will at most punish you. He will not kill you." Chen Jun Yan reached out and touched her cheek, "Moreover, this is the only way for me to have an excuse to get close to Miss, gain her trust, and then use her to create chances for the two of us."

Li Xiu Lan held his hand and intimately placed her face in it, "Then what if Circus Leader got angry and made me pick a wooden doll from the wooden box?"

"No matter what you would turn into Chen Jun Yan gazed at her gently, "I would still like you!"

Watching this scene, Ning Ning mumbled, "So that's how it is."

As it turned out, from the moment they met, everything had been according to Chen Jun Yan's plan. He had convinced Li Xiu Lan to play out a farce with him, one of a hero saving a damsel in distress.

As the movie continued, Ning Ning saw herself appear on screen. Li Xiu Lan used her nine chain links to strangle her, then gave a signal to Chen Jun Yan who had long been prepared. He rushed over to push Li Xiu Lan off and saved Ning Ning.

From the audience's point of view, the two of them had excellent chemistry and what they were doing was on justice's side.

But as Boss Qu appeared in front of the camera, Ning Ning could not hold back her tears.

He was but a supporting character, an unforgivable villainous character, but why did she sincerely look forward to seeing him appear in the shot again.

"Looks good, my Ning Ning is the most beautiful girl in the world."

No need to rush, mastering your razor skills will not happen in a day or two after practicing on just one or two people." Boss Qu turned around and began walking out. "Wait here, Papa will bring back more practice sources!"

"I know what you did with the box."

"Kindness never begets kindness, in the end you will be the one who gets hurt."

"I hate this world, this world has never been good to me, I also won't be kind to this world. But today is your birthday, it's the only day the accursed: Heaven ever showed me kindness. If If this is your wish."

Shut up! No laughing allowed, I'll kill anyone that laughs!"

"AAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Ning Ning suddenly bent over, hugged herself and started shivering. Amidst sounds of mourning, she stumbled as she made her way out of the cinema. Outside, the doorman was leaning against the wall with his arms folded. He slowly raised his head along with the snow white mask and slowly watched her back view as she bolted off.

"It's all fake!! It's all fake!! You can't trick me!!" Ning Ning rushed into the rain, crying as she was running, her tears were washed away by the rain.

The doorman suddenly rushed over, and dragged her back by her arms.

"It's fake..., sobs, all fake..... Ning Ning was still crying, she was drenched from the downpour. The doorman flagged a taxi, opened the door and pushed her in.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

Ning Ning choked for a while before she could state her address. As

the car started making its way to her home, she lowered her head and glanced at the time. It was actually only 1:40 in the morning. As it turned out all that she had experienced were but the length of a movie's runtime....

There was a new WeChat notification on her phone, it was from her manager. "The story overview and character design had been sent to your inbox. The audition is tomorrow, you have to study it carefully today, don't waste this opportunity as it is hard to come by."

Ning Ning dried her tears with one hand and opened the inbox on her phone with the other. She took a look at the story overview and character design. At this moment anything would do, as long as it could distract her. She read the name of the show with a trembling voice, "Ugly Girl."

The story revolved around a modern day prince and a mermaid.

The male lead was young and rich, but he was grievously hurt from an accident which led him to become temporarily blind. The female lead who had goddess-like good looks saved him and took care of him. In an effort to probe for his sincerity, she joked about how ugly she was, but the male lead still professed his love for her. After the male lead accepted the last treatment, the female lead had to leave because something came up. In the end the male lead misidentified the supporting female character as the female lead.

"Supporting female character Qu Ling." Ning Ning read the character design in a soft voice, "Ugly looks, frivolously narcissistic, full of herself, but had lived a smooth and comfortable life because of a nice and rich father. Didn't correct male lead after being misidentified as the female lead, went along with the mistake and became his girlfriend. Her father's company closed down afterwards and she was exposed, lived the remainder of her life being mocked by the people around her."

A rotten character design that didn't even have a hundred words, for no reason felt like a complete story in her mind.

How her parents looked forward to having her, how she was pampered as she was growing up, she attended schools her father told her to, no one had ever criticised her looks or personality, how much had her father have to do behind her back to achieve this? But her father died in a car accident, his company closed down, she lost everything overnight. Even the male lead who was the only one she could rely on had coldly called her out in front of everyone: ugly girl.

This was a character that would make people laugh, but Ning Ning

could only think of crying.

Back at home, she stumbled through the entrance dripping wet, leaving pools of water that looked like tear stains behind. She mumbled to herself as she looked at the clock on the wall I need to sleep early, can't have dark circles. have to wake up early and try to figure out the character design, think about the lines and prepare for the audition in the afternoon, I cannot cannot think about what happened in the cinema... That was a dream, yes, that was a dream! It was all fake, the cinema was fake, transmigration was fake, papa...."

Lightning flashed outside of the window, the sky turned snow white before fading back to black.

Ning Ning shivered again, she curled up and slowly knelt down, forehead stuck on the cold floorboard, hands hugging herself tightly. At first she could only moan softly, then the moans turned louder and mournful till finally she cried out, "Papa!!!"

Boom-It was storming cats and dogs. It was like God wanted to destroy the world with a flood. Inside the empty cinema, the doorman with the snow white mask stood in front of the screen quietly. On the screen, the story was playing out its last scene.

Heavy snow was falling, people were running around wildly. LI Xulu raised a finger at the burning man who was walking towards them and said, "Shoot him!"

Gunshots rang in the air, Boss Qu fell to the ground. With Ning Ning in one arm and using the other to support himself, he got up from the snowy ground covered with fire. He scanned everyone on site before finally fixing his gaze at the camera, fixing his gaze at the only audience outside of the camera.

"I won't die." Boss Qu said.

"Even if I die, I won't drink Meng Po's soup. The Doorman raised his head and looked up at him.

"I will remember what you look like Boss Qu said, "If I get reincarnated as a dog I will bite off your neck?"

"If I get reincarnated as a bird," the Doorman continued, "I will peck your eyes out?"

"Life after life....." Boss Qu said.

"In an unbreakable cycle. The Doorman said. Flames were burning his body, but the fires of hatred burned even more fiercely in his eyes.

Those flames passed through time, passed through space, passed through the screen and was reflected on the mask of the Doorman, dyeing his snow-white mask a bloody red.

Within the screen, outside the screen, two voices rang out together, one full of hoarseness, one full of peace, one hot like fire, one cold as ice, finally with the same resentment, they matched up like it was etched in memory.

"This hatred will last beyond death!!!"

The screen faded to black.

After that the credits rolled as it was accompanied by a tragic end theme. Male lead Chen Jun Yan, Female Lead Li Xiu Lan, the names of the supporting roles were seemingly endless. Wang Ma, Little Freckle, Long Er, and.... Ning Ning along with Boss Qu.

When it reached the end, a few white words appeared on the screen.

< <Republic Circus> >

The End.

As one story ended, another story began. When the night passed, another day dawned.

After the rain stopped, the city was shrouded in dark clouds. It was dark and grey, even morning looked like it was night. A person lay on the cold floorboards, Ning Ning had slept on it for the whole night. She abruptly opened her eyes the moment her phone began to buzz.

"Hello." She answered the phone, "Yes, I got it... I'm fine, I just overslept, I will immediately change and go over... Don't worry, I will make it in time before the audition starts."

After she hung up, Ning Ning slowly got up from the ground. She was feeling really cold, chills ran from her head all the way to her toes. She walked into the bathroom like a walking corpse with her arms dangling beside her. She stripped and turned on the hot water to wash herself.

But the moment the hot water touched her, she felt as if she was being burned by fire and got out immediately while crying out.

"So hot...scalding... Ning Ning hung her long hair, hugged herself and shivered. Then, as she was trembling she switched the hot water to cold water, and stood under it speechlessly.

After the 10 minutes shower, she turned the water off, wrapped

herself with a bath towel, grabbed another towel draped on a chair and dried her hair as she walked out of the bathroom.

She arrived in front of her wardrobe and pulled it open. There were a lot of clothes inside. Even though she knew she was auditioning for a part in a modern show, but for reasons unknown, she reached out and pulled out a very traditional red qipao.

The audition was scheduled at 2:30, she arrived at 1:30.

The cast was basically confirmed, all that was left to do was to go to the Director's studio for a small scale audition. But for some reason it had to be done in such a prestigious way, maybe it was for publicity.

Ning Ning thought this while she walked. Behind her, someone uttered in a voice full of doubt, "Is that..... Ning Ning?"

"It looks like her."

"...Is she on drugs? Why does she look like that?"

"She is said to be the prettiest vase¹ of the new generation, I feel lied to."

Not far from there, the male lead of the show, Chen Shuang He, looked towards her without any expression. His assistant beside him shook their head and evaluated, "Looks like the pressure of the audition got to her, she has already fallen apart."

Looking at the back view of what looked like a walking corpse, Chen Shuang He had on a complicated expression. Pity, despise, disappointment, disdain, he asked himself, would it be worth his maximum effort to crush this kind of person?

"No." He laughed coldly, "It will only take one minute to crush her!"

Chapter 16

16: Ugly Girl

At the audition.

"I am the ugly girl." Ning Ning sat in a corner, looking down with her hair hanging. She mumbled to herself while looking at the character design, "I'm frivolously narcissistic, full of myself, but has lived a smooth and comfortable life because of a nice rich father..."

Chen Shuang He walked past her without even looking at her.

The audition's first act involved a scene with him and a stand-in for the female lead.

With a blink of his eyes, Chen Shuang He lost his sight and transformed into a blind man. But as he turned blind he also received love. He looked in front of him blankly, his heavenly handsome face cracked a gentle smile people could not look away from. Chen Shuang He asked, "What do you look like?"

"Make a guess." The stand-in for the female lead was a bonafide actress. Chen Shuang He was performing well, but she was not bad as well. She put a hand on her hip, tilted her head and blinked in a cute manner.

Chen Shuang He smiled a little then reached out towards her with one hand.

"A small ear." He started touching her from her ear, his voice became more hoarse, deep and alluring. An energetic eyebrow, a cute nose, a...."

He didn't continue, but his finger stopped on her lips, then caressed them with his thumb.

The pheromones he was exuding quickly ignited her hormones, they interweaved in the air before finally transforming into a sweet scent of love.

An excellent actor was like an excellent midfielder in football, they were really good at controlling the field: With just a few words Chen Shuang He led this scene and successfully directed everyone's attention on him.

"Amazing. The onlookers muttered.

"Is this really an improvisation?"

"Were these lines predetermined, or... did he come up with them spontaneously?"

As the audition continued, the actress was unwittingly moved by Chen Shuang He's acting skills.

Colours of love appeared in her eyes, and for a moment she wanted to tell him that she was a beauty, In another moment she was afraid that he would only love her looks. This love was sweet yet prudent, finally she looked at him and said, "You're wrong, I'm a very ugly girl!"

"Cut!"

Along with the 'Cut!' from Chen Guan Chao, Chen Shuang He quickly pulled himself out of the character and looked at the actress retrospectively. She looked like she was still deep in character, she stole some glances at him then smiled and looked towards Chen Guan Chao.

"Next." Chen Guan Chao said.

Actors walked up one by one, transforming into characters of the script, fighting for their desired roles and giving it their all. Chen Guan Chao glanced towards Ning Ning from the corner of his eyes, this audition was specially prepared for her, It was as if it crushed her even before it even began. Ning Ning sat at a corner, her condition looked worse than usual.

It was time to end the farce. Chen Guan Chao looked towards Ning Ning's direction and said, "Next"

Ning Ning hesitated for a while, the person beside her elbowed her. She raised her head looking bewildered, a few auditioners furrowed their brows as she looked like someone out of it.

She got up and walked towards him, originally it was supposed to be an improvisation, but Chen Guan Chao suddenly said, "Act out the last scene."

Ning Ning was stunned.

The last scene for her role was the company of her father closing down, her being exposed in front of everyone and living the rest of her life humiliated.

"Let me." Chen Shuang He handed the cup in his hands to his

assistant then stepped forward. He smiled at Ning Ning warmly. "I will act with you."

A lot of people were jealous, including the actress that had just acted with him. She sized Ning Ning up uncontrollably, this outdated vase, how was she worth Chen Shuang He's respect?

Was it really respect?

"Someone like you, why are you still alive in this world?" Chen Shuang He questioned coldly as his expression suddenly turned dark.

Ning Ning was not ready at her spot when this was suddenly said to her. Her body felt cold, she lifted her head and was a little puzzled as she looked at him she tried to say something but her tongue was tied.

A strong imposing stage presence was unrelentingly pressuring her. Chen Shuang He's eyes revealed an unparalleled disgust: "A person should have some good points, what are your good points? Always believing you're right? Being willful? Or is it refusing to let go of a position you don't deserve to be in?"

Ning Ning struggled in the storm he created. "I...."

"If not for your father, no one in this world would look at you twice. Chen Shuang He's words were like daggers stabbing her heart, "You don't know what you are like? Let me tell you."

"Stop talking Ning Ning's voice had a hint of crying, "Stop talking...."

Even though she was standing in an audition room with four auditioners along with ten plus people, it felt like she was in a room full of people. They were laughing at her, they were mocking her, they stood behind Chen Shuang He and looked at her along with him, laughing while saying these two words, "Ugly Girl."

"Ahhhhh!!!!!" An Incomparably mournful scream escaped her mouth.

Chen Shuang He was startled by her scream, the words in his mouth were stuck. He furrowed his brows. As he recomposed himself to continue speaking, he saw Ning Ning started to shiver. It wasn't a shiver that was acted out, but a head-to-toe genuine shiver, real pain that affected the flesh. She looked at him while crying, It was as if she was looking at him but it was also as if she was looking at the people behind him. She asked as she cried, "What did I do wrong, I didn't harm any of you, why do all of you harm me like this?"

Chen Shuang He was shocked.

On the panel of auditioners, Chen Guan Chao suddenly sat up.

".....you were to blame for everything!" Chen Shuang He said with difficulty. No, that was not what he originally wanted to say, but under her influence he had difficulty controlling himself and said the next line Involuntarily, "Don't put that responsibility on another person! If you were not vain and pretended to be the person liked, why would I go against you?"

"You were the one who got the wrong person, why am I the only one getting punished? Why must I live while everyone sneers at me, just because Ning Ning slowly raised her hand and covered her face, her dissipating voice came from behind the gaps of her fingers, "Just because I am ugly?"

She started crying, the sound of her cries grew louder and was filled with more and more despair till finally she shouted hoarsely, "Papa!!!!"

The people present were mostly actors, they have seen a lot of crying scenes, Many of them had been part of many crying scenes. But when Ning Ning started crying, quite a few of them started having goosebumps, because the sounds of her cries were too realistic, it was like a cry of a person struggling on their deathbed.

An auditioner turned over and wanted to say something to Chen Guan Chao, but Chen Guan Chao gestured him to be quiet, then continued to watch Ning Ning, his eyes which were originally cold and emotionless began to glow like an ember.

But to Ning Ning, Chen Guan Chao no longer existed, the auditioners no longer existed, the other people at the audition no longer existed, even Chen Shuang He who was in front of her ceased to exist.

The people who existed were her ex-boyfriend, her ex-friends and the ex-employees from her father's company. Their gazes, their voices, the smiles on their faces, the things they said made her shiver. She curled up and slowly knelt down, forehead stuck on the cold ground, hands hugging herself tightly. At first she could only moan softly, then the moans turned louder and mournful till she finally cried out, "Papa!!!"

"They used to say I look good, but now they are calling me ugly girl!"

"He used to say he likes me, but now he is calling me ugly girl"

"All of them lied to me."

"I am so sad! Papa! I am suffering so much! Papal Save me!!"

Chen Shuang He started to take deep breaths uncontrollably. At first he planned to crush her within a minute, right now that plan was long out of the window. Although he didn't want to admit it, but maybe....her body had really inherited a little bit of Ning Yu Ren's talent. He had underestimated her, one minute was too short he needed two minutes!!

Suddenly, the crying stopped.

Ning Ning covered her face, and knelt on the spot silently.

It was a truck quietly driving towards a cliff kind of silence, a fire burning the last portion of a fuse type of silence, a neck within a noose and kicking the stool underneath type of silence.... A type of extreme depression, extreme suffering and extreme fear type of silence.

"... Ah... I remembered. She said extremely frivolously, "Papa is already dead."

She slowly put down the hands that were covering her face and look towards Chen Shuang He. Her face slowly bloomed with an extremely ruthless smile, it had a malicious feeling of someone who was hurt by the world and wanted to hurt the world. This malice twisted her smile, twisted her gaze, twisted her originally delicate and beautiful face... This smile, had transformed her into a real ugly girl!

Chen Shuang He gazed at her for a long time, until the sound of applause came from beside him. Who was it?

He turned his head over, then his eyes slowly widen.

Chen Guan Chao stood behind the auditioners table. Clap, clap, clap, applauded slowly.

The other auditioners stood up in succession, and applauded along with him. With them leading, the rest of the people started applauding. The waves of applause gushed towards Ning Ning.

Cheering for her acting skills, cheering for her suffering and pain.

Chapter 17

17: The Start of Everything

A few days later.

"Dad, what are you saying?" Chen Shuang He furrowed his brows. "Giving Qu Ling's role to LI Yu and not Ning Ning, why?"

He didn't say the final sentence. Are you being idiotic again?

Chen Guan Chao took a sip of coffee. "I have another role for her."

Chen Guan He looked down and his eyes widened with surprise. "Father, you want to reshoot this movie?"

"Yes." Chen Guan Chao placed his coffee cup on the coffee table in front of him. There was an old script beside the cup, he looked at it and said, "I want her to play the Phantom!"

On the cover of the script were four big words-Phantom of the Theater.

Chen Shuang He felt suffocated. Although both were Chen Guan Chao's movies, <<Ugly Girl>> and <<Phantom of the Theater had very different status. Frankly speaking, <<Ugly Girl> was but a simple movie with a straightforward and relaxing plot, the roles weren't complex. It was mainly being made for Valentine's Day this year.

But<<Phantom of the Theater> was different, completely different...

"Just because of that one audition of her? At first Chen Guan Chao was here to fight for the Injustice against Ning Ning, but now he was acting a little weird. "I admit, her performance at the audition was not bad, but who can prove that wasn't a flash in the pan?. Moreover, the role of the Phantom is very complicated, it is a lot more complicated than Qu Ling. I don't think she would do well with it!"

Chen Shuang He was at a loss for words.

"My life's biggest failure, is 'Phantom of the Theater.'" Chen Guan Chao reached out and touched the old script cover. He slowly said, "My biggest mistake, was to chase Ning Yu Ren out of the cast. Now I want to make up for this mistake... I want to give Ning Ning a chance, to see if I'm wrong again, if the world was wrong again. She actually

has a talent, talented like her mother....."

The fingers at the side of Chen Shuan He's body slowly curled into a fist. His heart told him, Why always look at them when you're not willing to look at your actual wife, your actual child? Then, I want to quit < <Ugly Girl> > Finally, Chen Shuang He uttered coldly, "If she is the Phantom, then give the male lead's position. I'll act as Lu Yun He!"

This argument was not known to Ning Ning. Chen Shuang He had his pain, she also had hers.

Water was running from the tap of a washstand. In front of the mirror was Ning Ning, but the reflection in the mirror was the face of Qu Ning'er looking at her coldly through the mirror. Ning Ning closed her eyes then opened them again, the reflection in the mirror was still herself.

When Ning Ning first saw this, she was so shocked she fell to the floor. As time went by and it happened over and over again, her reaction mellowed. Maybe it was the same as the singing dog. When Qu Ning'er was burned to ash, she was stuck to Ning Ning's body. When the rage and hate that belonged to Qu Ning'er grew within Ning Ning, Ning Ning was no longer human, but a monster.

A knock came from behind her, Ning Ning turned off the tap and shouted, "Coming" Ning Ning opened the door. Cul Hong Mel who was wearing a new leopard coat arrogantly asked, "Why so late?"

She was about to walk in, but Ning Ning pushed her out.

Cul Hong Mel took a few steps back and looked at Ning Ning with a bit of surprise, "What are you doing?"

"This is my house, my house doesn't welcome you." Ning Ning said coldly.

Cul Hong Mei stared at her for a moment, suddenly took a phone out and pointed it towards her then laughed coldly, "Come on, let your fans look at how you treat your grandmother. Hit me, scold me, repeat what you said just now, let everyone know how unfilial you are!"

The air Ning Ning breathed out was ice cold. She felt a hand, a hand that belonged to Qu Ning'er, reached out from behind her, controlling her right hand. She grabbed her grandmother's phone over then turned it towards her, she laughed with a childlike innocence and cruelty, "Just bring it, I also feel that it's time to let everyone see what you are like, hit me, scold me, tell everyone what bullshit agreement

you want me to sign, tell everyone how you made off with all the savings your daughter accumulated throughout the years, you didn't even leave her any money for her medical treatment!"

This was the thing that was troubling Ning Ning the most.

Ning Yu Ren spends a lot of money every year, if it was when she was still acting, then it would be a very normal expenditure. What was weird was that her spendings remained the same after she retired. During the days she was hospitalised, the time she needed money the most, Ning Ning was surprised to find out that she had no money in her bank account! She only laughed at it when Ning Ning asked her about it. Where did she spend the money on? Whom did she give it to? After some consideration, Ning Ning could only think of her grandmother.

"What nonsense are you talking about! All of a sudden, Cul Hong Mel shouted at her angrily, "Didn't she give you all her money?"

Since she was getting on the years, the shouting made her cough two times. After she caught her breath while grabbing her chest for quite some time, she gritted her teeth and said to Ning Ning, "She's like this, you're also like this. She used to be very obedient, one day she suddenly stops listening to me, when did it start...."

She fell silent for a moment before she slowly spat a name of a film out, "Yes, everything started from < < Phantom of the Theater > >"

After she finished, it was like she suddenly understood something and looked at Ning Ning with an extremely complicated gaze. Envy, disappointment, agony, regret, abhorration... Finally she laughed, an extremely weird laugh. "I know where she spent the money at."

"That's enough." A male voice suddenly interrupted Cul Hong Mel.

Ning Ning's gaze followed the voice, she saw that it was her manager LI Bo Yue who had arrived. He was an elegant and very well-dressed man. This world probably did not have a man who was more suited to wear a suit than him. In fact, Ning Ning felt that he was basically born wearing a suit! Furthermore, he walked majestically, his smile was proper, his words were influential and motivational he should not have been involved with the show business. He should have taken part in the elections!

LI Bo Yue stood in front of Ning Ning and made an elegant posture inviting Cul Hong Mel to leave. "Please leave, otherwise I will call security."

This time Cul Hong Mel didn't continue to be a nuisance. She

looked at Ning Ning again, then left with a weird smile. Ning Ning ignored her, she also didn't believe anything that was just said. She brought Li Bo Yue into her home, Li Bo Yue shivered the moment he walked in, "Why is it so cold? You didn't turn on the heater?"

It was already the coldest time of the year, Ice were hanging off tree branches, but the heater in the room was not switched on which made it felt as cold as a tomb.

Ning Ning walked into the kitchen quietly and poured two cups of water. She took one cup and drank as she sat on the sofa, Li Bo Yue looked at the water that didn't seem to have an ounce of heat then raised his head to look at her "What is up with you?"

"I feel I am still Qu... Ning Ning swallowed the three words Qu Ning'er and switched them up with another name, "Qu Ling."

"You have not come out of character?" Li Bo Yue asked.

At that moment, Ning Ning really wanted to confide in him. To tell him that she saw someone else in the mirror everyday. How she was not able to take hot showers, not able to drink hot drinks, furthermore she couldn't light any fire. The moment she saw fire she would start shivering out of fear. But Li Bo Yue did not have this kind of time and patience. He took out his phone and made a call, after he hung up he said, "I have made an appointment with a psychiatrist for you, this weekend at 3pm, I will send you the name and address later. Now let's talk about work."

Ning Ning leaned forward and looked at him. Upon hearing this, she slowly leaned back onto the sofa then raised her hand and laughed reluctantly before saying, "Alright."

Li Bo Yue opened his briefcase and tossed her a pile of scripts. Before she had a chance to look at them he put both his hands in front of his lips and smiled, "Want to listen to my opinion?" Ning Ning paused as she opened the first script, "Please speak."

Li Bo Yue reached out and kept all the scripts that were given to her, as if it was just a formality. He gave her the power to choose, but the final decision lied with him.

"You don't need to look at these." He tossed the pile of scripts aside, smiled at Ning Ning and said, "Your performance at the audition has gone around, the roles offered to you now are the same archetype. Evil girl, ugly girl, bad girl, If you have to act as one of these roles, why not pick the best one?"

"Which is the best choice?" Ning Ning asked.

"It's this one." Li Bo Yue pushed a long prepared script from one end to the other end of the coffee table towards Ning Ning.

Ning Ning picked up the script and read its name.

"Phantom of the Theater."

1911 French author Gaston Leroux published the novel <<Phantom of the Opera>>. The story narrated a strange and thrilling love story that happened in a Theater in Paris, a "ghost" fell in love with the new actress Christine. Not only did it secretly taught her how to sing, but also helped her to get the position of female lead, committing several murders in the process.

This story had been adapted many times, it was hugely successful in musicals and movies. The young Chen Guan Chao created his first script <<Phantom of the Theater> based on this story. In order to cater to the local market and local audience, he made daring changes to the original script. The theater was changed to the Republic, western opera was changed to chinese opera and the biggest change was that--the phantom was to be a woman.

This story was about a phantom that fell in love with a new opera singer, Lu Yun He. Not only did the phantom secretly taught him how to sing. she also helped him to get the position of male lead, committing several murders in the process.

As a legendary famous director's first self-written and self-directed film, the results in the end were unsatisfactory. Not only were the changes in the plot ridiculed, the performances of both the lead actors were insulted by the public. Maybe the blow was too big, thus Chen Guan Chao decided to leave the movie industry ever since, only returning three years later. This time he was not to be an actor anymore, he switched over to being a director.

"I have received reliable information, Director Chen Intends to reshoot Phantom of the Theater>> LI Bo Yue leaned over and looked at Ning Ning, his eyes burning with the flames of ambition. "There are three candidates for the Phantom, you are one of them. The other two are big names that would make you shiver once you hear them, but It's alright. Director Chen favours you the most, and will also help you!"

Compared to his exuberant ambition, Ning Ning could only think of one sentence, the sentence Cul Hong Mel left her with.

"Yes, everything began with <<Phantom of the Theater>>..."

Chapter 18

18: What is Love

Filming a story from decades ago now would naturally need adjustments to be made according to the market; more delicate lines, better cast, more investments and along with the flow of time, a famous director with a status no one else could reach.

Yet another audition.

Sure enough two big names that would make you shiver once you hear them attended. Solo audition, solo Interview. When it was Ning Ning's turn, Chen Guan Chao sat behind an office desk with his arms crossed and asked, "Describe the phantom with two words."

Ning Ning: "A monster."

Chen Guan Chao: "Three words."

Ning Ning: "An ugly monster."

The character design for the role of the Phantom was that because she was born ugly, her parents sold her to the circus when she was young.. After enduring a lot of hardships in the circus she finally escaped, hiding herself In an abandoned old theater. Afterwards, the old theater was renovated, a new theatrical troupe moved in, she hid in the shadows, peeping at the male lead Chen Yun He who was as warm and bright as the sun.

Chen Guan Chao: "What kind of Phantom would you show the audience?"

Ning Ning looked down and thought about it for a moment, then looked up and laughed coldly, "I will dominate them with fear!"

Even if it was coated with romance, the movie at its core was a suspenseful thriller, The female lead was a serial killer, if she was not able to dominate them with fear, then. It would not be a thriller! (Go out turn right and report to the Valentine's day slot.)

This time it was Chen Guan Chao's turn to look down and think for a moment, then he raised his head and looked at her. "Use a term to describe the phantom's love for the male lead."Ning Ning answered without thinking, "Monopolisation!"

The Phantom was self-abased, it didn't matter if she had an unmatched and wonderful singing voice. No one had ever loved her, she had also never loved anyone, until the appearance of the male lead. For the sake of obtaining him, she was willing to do anything in her capabilities, including murders as well as imprisoning of the male lead at the end of the story.

"What do you think would be the ending for this love?" Chen Guan Chao stared at her as he leaned slightly forward.

Ning Ning stopped for a while, then resolutely answered, "Destruction!"

"You can go back first." Chen Guan Chao looked a little disappointed, he leaned back on his chair. As Ning Ning was about to leave the room, he said from behind her, "Go and think about it again, give me an answer in three days time. Tell me then... what is love to the Phantom?"

What is love?

After she returned home, Ning Ning switched on her computer. Li Bo Yue had already sent her resources for the older version of < <Phantom of the Theater> >. Who could she ask? She didn't know what love was, so she wanted to ask Chen Guan Chao himself, ask the Phantom from the original production what the hell was this rubbish!!

The picture quality from those years naturally could not be compared to the present day's quality. But what hurt the eyes more were the acting skills of the male and female leads. It was no wonder this film deserved to burn in the depths of hell. And that it was still a black mark in Chen Guan Chad's history till today, for which he was still attacked from time to time.

Ning Ning took out a pen from the drawer. She wrote down the lines as she watched the movie, then she brought the script in front of her wardrobe mirror. She adjusted her attitude then affectionately said, "Yun He, love you."

The reflection in the mirror wasn't her, It was Qu Ning'er who was wearing burnt Republican clothes along with hair draping over her face. She mouthed soundlessly to Ning Ning. "You don't believe you will fall in love with that good looking boy, and you don't believe that he will love the ugly you."

The phone rang. Ning Ning blinked. The Qu Ning'er in the mirror had vanished and she was left with herself.

"Hello?" Ning Ning answered the phone.

"How is it?" Li Bo Yue's voice rang out from the phone.

"I'm not sure yet, I couldn't answer one of the questions. Ning Ning asked him, "Li Bo Yue, what is love?"

"Hold on" After some clicks and clacks of the keyboard, LI Bo Yue answered with the speech cadence of a politician, "Love! is the most wonderful thing on earth. Love is you looking at the moon while look at you! Love! is the most humble thing on earth. Love is you being on top of the clouds while am left in the dust! Lovel Is...."

"Stop stop stop!" Ning Ning could not take it anymore, "Where did you get that?"

"Google and IMDB of course." LI Bo Yue returned to his normal way of speaking and analysed for her, "Director Chen's heart is very artsy. If you want to move him you have to be as artsy as him or be even more artsy than him! What is love, right? Leave it to me, will provide you with a standard answer tonight!"

Swift and decisive, the meticulous LI Bo Yue hung up right after he finished, probably to write about what love was.

".....even if there is a standard answer, I will be exposed through acting!" Ning Ning held her phone, turned her head and looked at the mirror. Her reflection smiled at her gloomily. It was the type of smile someone who had lived underground and had never seen the sky would flash, someone who wouldn't be warm even if the sun shone on him.

"I know the pain of being called ugly, I know the anger of getting mocked, I hate this world! Since this world does not treat me kindly, why should I be kind to It!" Ning Ning suddenly punched the mirror, then screamed at her own reflection, "So you tell me, how do you love someone? How do I love someone?"

After a few minutes, she slowly walked back, turned around and headed out. Once she got downstairs, she hailed a cab. She said as she sat in the car, "35 Rouge Street."

The car stopped at the entrance of Life Cinema.

Ning Ning opened the car door. She looked at the lantern In front of her, the big door, the doorman, the poster

She had left not long ago, she came back, but It felt like a lifetime ago.

She walked closer and took a look, the poster on the door had changed:

Title: < < Scarlet Stage > > Starring: Tang Zhen, Cul Ping Ping

It was another movie she had not seen before, two more names she had not heard of. An old theater was on the poster. There was a couple on the stage. The man was dressed in a costume, just like a good actor. The woman on the other hand was wearing something fashionable, just like a businesswoman., She held the male actor in her arms, dagger in one hand, stabbing his chest as tears flowed down her cheek and dripped onto his face.

Ning Ning looked carefully at the poster, before she finally mumbled, "This is it."

For the time being, regardless of the content, based on the backstory and character settings, this movie had many similarities with < < Phantom of the Theater > >. It was also a thriller coated with romance.

She could find Inspiration from this film. If she was lucky, maybe she could find the answer to Director Chen's question. But this would mean she had to transform into another person again, to experience an unknown journey. She might experience the same pain as last time, but what did it matter?

"There is nothing to lose anyway." Ning Ning laughed coldly to herself..

She walked forward but was blocked by a hand.

"Ticket." The doorman turned around and looked at her with his snow white mask.

Ning Ning was stunned, "Didn't give you that last time?"

"One ticket per movie. The doorman answered dully. You don't have a ticket; I cannot let you in."

Ning Ning opened her mouth, but he was right, she could not retort. If a ticket allowed one to watch movies for an unlimited amount of times, the cinema would have closed down long ago.

"Where is the ticketing counter?" She looked at her surroundings, there was no ticketing counter in sight, so she changed her question, "How can I buy a ticket?"

The doorman quietly leaned on the door, unmoving, only shaking his head very slowly. "Why do you still want to go in?" He suddenly asked, "Have you not had your fill of crying from last time?"

Ning Ning was stunned, then she remembered the awkward

incident from last time. She ran past him crying, tears mixing with the rain ruining the makeup on her face, she bawled towards the sky, her face which was dubbed the prettiest vase of the new generation was smashed into pieces by her agony.

If someone had taken a photo of that, it would be a black mark in her history for the rest of her life.

Before she could say anything, the sky suddenly rumbled. She turned and looked at the sky then broke into laughter, "What a coincidence, It was raining last time, It's going to rain this time too." "Go home." The doorman suddenly said.

Ning Ning shook her head and smiled at him, "I'm not going, I will just wait here."

"It's useless." The doorman said, don't have any tickets to give you.

"There has to be someone with tickets." Ning Ning leaned on the wall beside the door and dully said, "I will just stand here, wait for the person with tickets to arrive, then think of a way to buy the tickets.

But no one came, there was only the unending rain.

Ning Ning got bored so she started looking for information on auctions of old movie tickets online. She didn't know anyone in this line of work. this kind of collection was not popular either. Sometimes she would find a seller but they didn't have the ticket that she wanted. I was not just the ticket, she couldn't even find any information on "Life Cinema".

She turned and eyed the front door how about, sneaking in?

"Don't think about sneaking in." The doorman's voice suddenly rang out. He wasn't even looking towards Ning Ning's direction, eyes gazing at the sky. "Never ever think about sneaking in."

"Why?" Ning Ning asked.

"It's getting really late, why are you still not leaving?" The doorman was getting angry for unknown reasons, "Aren't you cold? Aren't you hungry? Won't your parents get worried?" Ning Ning fell silent for a moment then said in a whisper: I have not father, my mother.. My mother is not around anymore."

The doorman was suddenly speechless.

"Moreover I am not cold and I am not hungry." She lowered her head and looked at her hands, her eyes were lit with black flames, "I just want to.... just want to use these hands to grab something, I just

want to act!"

The rain was getting louder, it flowed down heavily along the roof. The door was like a dividing line. Ning Ning leaned on the wall to the left, the doorman leaned on the wall to the right. He stared at her with a indistinguishable expression under the snow white mask. This persisted for a few minutes. Ning Ning tried to break the silence so she turned and smiled, "Oh by the way, what do you think love is?"

She regretted it as soon as she finished saying the words. She should not have asked a stranger a question like this. Fortunately, he didn't seem to be willing to answer the question. He looked towards a direction and said gloomily, "She's here."

Who was here? Ning Ning looked over in the same direction, she could only see a frail figure within the rain. The figure was trudging in the puddles of water with difficulty, hobbling and without complaints. The figure finally reached the entrance of the cinema. Within the tight grasp of their old and dried hand, was an old movie ticket.

Chapter 19

19: Even-numbered Designated Tickets

The person was an old woman getting on her years, aged and dirty as if she had not showered in years. She had greasy hair, the clothes on her back was also torn.

"It's not playing today either?" She looked at the poster by the door, muttered before turning around and walking away.

"Walt!" Ning Ning hurriedly chased after her. "Excuse me, how much would you sell the ticket you are holding for?"

The Doorman by her side pulled her from the rain back under the roof.

"She won't sell it." He said Indifferently as he looked at the back view slowly hobbling away, "She has already been waiting for one movie for fifteen years, she will wait as long as she still draws breath.."

Just as he finished talking, you could hear a loud screeching from the brake of a car. Ning Ning turned over and looked. She saw a car leaving the scene in a panic, the old woman was laying on her side motionless, even at this state she clutched the movie ticket tightly to her chest.

An hour later at the hospital.

The doctor came out of the operation room, said a few words to Ning Ning then shook his head. "She is running out of time."

He added, "If you have anything to say, say it now."

Ning Ning opened the door, slowly walked towards the dying old woman.

"I cannot die, I cannot die..... her faint voice could only be heard after Ning Ning walked closer, she was encouraging herself, "I have not watched the film, cannot die...."

What film was worth waiting fifteen years of a person's life? What film filled a person's thoughts as she was on the verge of death?

"Old lady," Ning Ning asked her, "how can I contact your family?"

The old woman didn't tell her any means to contact her family. She looked at Ning Ning absent-mindedly, finally she was able to focus and said weakly, "I know you. You are an actress. I saw your movie on another person's phone when I was on a bus. I was chased off the bus before I could finish the movie, they said I stink., cough cough. I, I like your film."

Ning Ning was shocked, to think that she was her fan.

"I heard you calling out to me before." The old woman raised her trembling hand, "You wanted this?"

A wrinkled old movie ticket layed on her palm. A ticket that she did not let go even when she was undergoing surgery. It would be too hypocritical to say no now, so Ning Ning nodded calmly.

"I can give you the ticket. But, you, you have to help me. The old woman suddenly reached out and grabbed Ning Ning's wrist, she begged her pitifully, "Help me watch the movie, help me... help me save him."

Ning Ning felt strange. "Save whom?"

"It's, it's in my pocket." The old woman's voice was getting weak.

Ning Ning took out a photo from the old woman's pocket. The photo was a corner cut out of another photo. On it was a boy that was around the age of eight or nine. He looked a little shy, looking down to avoid the camera, similar to a gullible little deer.

"You, you have to watch the movie he is in." The old woman looked at Ning Ning fervently, "You have to think of a way to save him..."

Ning Ning felt that it was absurd. The old woman used fifteen years of her time to wait for a movie, just so she could transmigrate into it and change the fate of a character in the movie? But after some consideration, she felt that this absurdity was excusable. Because if she had a similar chance, she was also willing to return to < < Republic Circus > > , to change Papa's and everyone's fates.

So everyone else could treat this old woman as a joke, but she alone could not.

"Go save him. Go save him. Save him at all costs, even if I have to sacrifice myself... you have to... you have to..." At the end of her frailty, she had a terrifying final spark. The old woman suddenly sat up from the hospital bed, her dried up hands forcefully dragged Ning Ning to her front and shouted, "1988!! 1988!! 1988!!!"

After shouting 1988 thrice, it was like she had expended all of her

energy. Her throat suddenly gurgled twice, then she fell over silently.

Beep

Ning Ning raised her head to take a look, a straight line was on the display of the ECG.

The matter of the funeral was easy to deal with. As Ning Ning left the room, representatives from two funeral parlours had approached her. They almost came to blows in the midst of fighting over the right of the proceedings: Ning Ning chose one of the companies and paid for the old woman's funeral fees and treated it as payment for the movie ticket. She also had them identify her in the meantime.

It was easy to handle things when you have money, the Identity of the old woman was revealed very quickly, her name was Wen Xiao Ning.

"You are such a good person." The funeral parlour representative said as he was wiping his sweat, "We called her family and informed them of her death, they immediately hung up. The call had only connected after a dozen attempts, they scolded me a dozen times before telling me they don't know this person."

This should be the reason why the old woman did not tell her any person of contact. She was not married. No husband, no children, no friends, no family. The only person that was contactable was a brother, whom upon hearing about her death, had refused to come over to have one last look at her and was unwilling to fork out a single cent for her funeral.

A lonely old woman that was seemingly abandoned by the world.

Her only inheritance was this old movie ticket.

Besides this, she had nothing else.

After solving this messy affair, another day passed by. At night, Ning Ning held the movie ticket en route to Life Cinema and thought to herself, 'I never promised you anything. You waited fifteen years for the film, there is no way I....'

Her footsteps stopped in front of the cinema.

"Ah, Ning Ning mumbled, "you should have waited for one more day?"

In front of her, the poster at the entrance of the cinema had changed again.

< <Scarlet Stage> > that was originally there was gone, another

poster had taken its place.

On the poster was a pitch black swamp. The little boy from the old woman's photo was standing in the middle of the swamp. There were a lot of people in the vicinity of the swamp, but they all watched as he sank. He also did not seem to be asking for help, silently allowing himself to sink.

Title: Abandoned Child > >

Starring: Wen Yu

Ning Ning stood in front of the poster for quite a while, before she turned and asked the doorman, "Where is the movie from yesterday?"

"The screening ended." The doorman leaned on the wall, as concise as ever.

"When will it be screened again?" Ning Ning asked.

"Who knows." The doorman answered replied casually..

Ning Ning turned her attention back to the poster in front of her. It was fated, she had no other choice. The day after tomorrow would be the time to get back to Director Chen with an answer, but she still had not found one..

There were two choices in front of her right now. One, to continue waiting and see if the film for tomorrow night will be similar to < <Phantom of the Theater. But the chances of that were small, the odds of that happening were almost the same as her trying to guess the answer of Director Chen's question by luck. Two, to transmigrate into the film in front of her make use of the time difference and carefully think of how to answer the question, how to act as the phantom, how to go about things...

Ning Ning chose what she felt was the most dependable method.

She handed the ticket over to the doorman and sald, "I want to go in."

The doorman's gaze moved from her face to the ticket in her hand. He didn't immediately take It this time, but asked in a deep voice, "Have you decided?"

Ning Ning felt that he was a bit strange, he was not so talkative previously.She answered, "Yes."

The doorman stared at her for some time, as if he didn't want to say it but had to, he asked, "What is the time you want to designate?"

Ning Ning was puzzled. "What time?"

"You are holding an even-numbered designated ticket. The doorman added, "Even-numbered designated tickets allow you to designate the time you enter the movie."

Upon hearing this, Ning Ning hastily looked down at the ticket in her hand.

At first she didn't see any difference, but with his reminder she realised the ticket in her hand was different from the one she had received from her mother. Although it was the same yellow paper with Life Cinema written on it, but this was a ticket for a seat in the front. It was located four rows in front of her previous ticket, fourth row from the front number twelve..

Not only did the word Admission appear on the round stamp on the left, there was a small red word-Designated.

Just as the doorman said, this was a designated ticket.

An even-numbered designated ticket which allowed a designation of time of entrance.

Chapter 20

20: Information on the Newspaper

Summer 1987

Bam

A heavy object fell from the sky and landed in front of Wen Yu.

"Someone jumped from the building-*

A woman's sharp scream and chaotic footsteps rang out around Wen Yu. Wen Yu opened his mouth and shouted at the corpse in front of him, "Mama....."

These were the last word he ever spoke.

Afterwards, he lost his voice, never speaking another word again.

Half a month later, Wen Yu sat in a room without making a sound. The room had no air conditioning, neither did it have an electric fan. Sitting inside felt like sitting in a steam oven, but he felt like he had the chills.

An overweight woman sat opposite of him, her chubby face was full of sweat. She said with disgust, "I have two kids at home, feeding them is costing me an arm and a leg, how can afford another one?"

"I need to leave for work soon, I can't possibly bring a child along." Another person who was skinny and fanning himself with a palm fan stated.

"Why are you looking at me?" A bald man choked on the beer he was drinking as the other two looked at him. He wiped his mouth and said, "Give me a break, I still want to get a girlfriend, who would want me with this bastard at my side?"

The group was trying to push the responsibility to each other, no one was willing to keep this hot potato. At this moment the door to the room suddenly opened, a relative turned around to look, "Ah, Xiao Ning is here."

Ning Ning stood at the door with a swollen face. She had had no time to change out of the red camisole she was wearing. It was hugging her curvy figure, causing her to exude a vulgar and seductive aura.

She stumbled into the house and looked for a corner to sit down. She opened her bag and brought out a bottle of ointment. She applied it on her leg as she quietly looked at the little boy opposite her.

As she had just arrived, she didn't know much. All she knew was that the mother of the child had just jumped off a building and died. The mother did not have much savings while she was alive, and didn't leave behind much after she died, which was why his relatives were unwilling to raise him.

Not only was she unwilling to raise him, the overweight woman even walked up and grabbed his hair and shook his head non-stop while complaining, "I know you would drag us down, why didn't you die together with your useless mother? You monster!"

....monster?

Ning Ning paused what she was doing. She suddenly stood up and walked towards the overweight woman who was still scolding the boy, then raised the bottle of ointment above the woman's head.

Splash

"Ah!" Drenched from the head, the overweight woman screamed. She turned around and shouted, "Stupid bitch, what are you trying to do?"

Ning Ning laughed at her coldly. The two phrases she currently hated the most now were 'ugly monster' and 'monster'. After those, monster was above ugly girl. She smashed the bottle on the table, shattering it. Ning Ning pointed the jagged end towards the woman and laughed. "What are you going to do about it?"

The other two frantically pulled them apart. But even if they didn't do that, the overweight woman would have walked away on her own. Ning Ning's current look was way too scary, like the mouth of a volcano that was about to erupt. The more she smiled, the scarier she seemed.

"Why so violent." The overweight woman softly mumbled as she returned to her seat, "You stupid bitch, don't tell me you want to raise the little monster?"

Ning Ning sat back at her original spot without making a sound as she applied the remaining ointment on her wound. The woman was not wrong. her current body was unsuitable to raise a child.

She transmigrated into the old woman's body in her younger days. Her current self was called Wen Xiao Ning, the aunt of the lead character Wen Yu. She did not expect that the old woman was a sex

worker when she was younger. Furthermore, the money that she earned was not for herself, it was to provide for her boyfriend, Hul Huo.

The wounds on her body were fresh from a fight-the things she could endure, were unbearable for Ning Ning.

Ning Ning fought with the boyfriend for a while before she finally knocked him out with a stool. She wiped the blood from her nose, went through the drawers and cupboards, and took anything that was worth even a little bit of money into her bag. She then left her boyfriend's house carrying the bag.

Along the way she asked for directions and had managed to make it just in time to meet with a group of people trying to shirk this responsibility. The overweight woman screamed, "Whom do you want to go with? You should at least say something!"

Ning Ning did not meddle with this. She continued to rub the bruise on her leg. As she was rubbing it she suddenly but slowly raised her head, her eyes following a pair of skinny legs upwards. She looked at the little boy standing in front of her.

He had fine hair and fine eyebrows, looking like a tender and delicate boy. He was standing in front of Ning Ning like a porcelain doll, silently reaching his hand out to her.

"Don't choose me." Ning Ning couldn't help but laugh. "I don't even have the means to provide for you."

But Wen Yu gazed at her quietly, not retracting his outstretched hand.

"Don't choose me." Ning Ning's expression became solemn, she repeated her words again, "I don't even have the means to provide for you."

Because of the previous experience, she didn't intend to form any deep connections with anyone in the movie. She would fulfil Wen Xiao Ning's last wish, to give Wen Yu a hand when he faced danger, but she wouldn't do more for him-because she was scared! Giving in a relationship was too painful, accepting a relationship was too painful, losing a relationship was too painful.

To rephrase it in modern terms, 'Our body had been hollowed out!'

The two of them stared at each other. Finally, it was the overweight woman who took Wen Yu. Afterall including Ning Ning, the three other people were not financially equipped to raise a child.

"Just my luck!" The overweight woman spat on the floor, grabbed Wen Yu's underarms and walked outside angrily. As they left, the little boy would occasionally turn around and look at Ning Ning with his pitch black eyes.

"Don't look at me like that!" Ning Ning kept her solemn expression and thought, I can't even save myself!"

Her bag did not have much money, if she wanted to settle down in 1987, she needed to have a job that would earn her enough to live on. She definitely could not continue to be a sex worker, but she also didn't want to be a female worker in a textile mill or a factory, she hoped to be able to find a crew or theater related job. This was very difficult, she could only work odd jobs on the side as she looked for information of such jobs.

The days were already tough, her ex-boyfriend refused to go away. He repeatedly came back and asked for her to get back together with him.

"Xiao Ning, I was wrong! Let's get back together!"

"Xiao Ning, I can't afford to eat anymore. Come home and cook for me!"

"Xiao Ning, my clothes are torn. Help me patch them up!"

"Xiao Ning, I've already taken Boss Qin's money. You can't bear to see me get beaten up right?"

Then go spend a night with him.....

"You don't have to trouble Qin, will beat you up!" Ning Ning grabbed a broom and hit him!

As she was knocking off from her job, her boss requested for her resignation. She was not the only one that wasn't able to bear her ex-boyfriend, the other employees found it unbearable too, so he requested that she take one for the team and bring her plaything along with her as she left for good.

Under the setting sun, Ning Ning walked home with a bruise on one eye. On the way back she went past someone. She stopped in her tracks and turned her head to look at him.

Wen Yu who was carrying a schoolbag also stopped in his tracks. He turned his face which was swollen on one side and fixed his gaze on her.

At that moment, they actually sympathized with each other's

sorrow.

"Why am I so depressed?" Ning Ning scolded herself in her mind, then turned around and continued walking. The streets of 1987 were not filled with nightlife. She saw a candy art store. On the store, there was a disc with the twelve zodiacs. A child handed over money and spun the disc. The needle landed on the dragon, the child clapped. The stall owner poured some melted sugar on a board, and sculpted it into a dragon, then he gave the dragon to the child. The child held the dragon up and vivaciously ran down the streets where there were an array of stalls and all kinds of people.

The sound of footsteps came from behind, Ning Ning's right hand was lightly held by someone. She looked around and saw Wen Yu standing behind her, holding up a deep-fried dough cake wrapped in newspaper at her. The dough cake had turned cold, its oil had seeped into the newspaper.

"You eat it, I'm not hungry." Ning Ning was very hungry, but she cannot eat his food because she didn't know if that was all he had for the day. Wen Yu stared at her. He tore a small piece of the dough cake off, then shoved the remaining dough cake along with the newspaper at her.

"....getting in my good books won't do you any favour." Ning Ning said coldly, but he responded with a smile.

He was really a sweet idiot. Ning Ning grunted and took a bite out of the dough cake. It started as nibbles, but the nibbles gradually became bigger bites before she finally devoured the cake. After she was done, she opened the newspaper in an attempt to look for any crumbs.

Then, she froze.

Ning Ning muttered as she looked at the contents of the newspaper, "How is this possible?"

This was a newspaper from last week, with this piece of news published on it: An adaptation of <<Phantom of the Opera>> titled <<Phantom of Theater>> would begin filming shortly. It would hold open auditions for the female lead. The deadline was at the end of July, the venue for the audition would be at Orchid Theater.

At that moment. Ning Ning felt like she was plucked from reality. Didn't she arrive in a movie named <<Abandoned Child>>? Why did <<Phantom of Theater>> appear here? Hold on.... If she recalled carefully, within the information Li Bo Yue provided her, the year in which <<Phantom of the Theater>> was filmed seems to be

stated as-1987.

.....the deadline is at the end of this month, three days remaining. Ning Ning suddenly started running with the newspaper. Wen Yu was stunned, he chased after her with his schoolbag. Ning Ning ran to the train station. In this time period you didn't need to provide your identification card nor did you have to queue to buy a train ticket. Whoever was physically strong enough could push his or her way to the front of the line.

"Give me a ticket to xx." Ning Ning took out the last dollar from her pocket.

The ticketing staff took her money, looked behind her and asked, "One or two person?"

Ning Ning looked back and saw Wen Yu standing behind her, panting breathlessly from running, his cheeks flushed. He could not talk, but used his expression while tightly tugging onto the corner of her clothes to tell her, 'Bring me with you'.

".....I'm sorry, cannot afford your ticket." Ning Ning answered with difficulty. Wen Yu's expression darkened. He did not throw a tantrum, he quietly lowered his head defeatedly.

".....I'm going to another province for the sake of confirming something." Ning Ning slowly squatted down. She wanted to reach out and touch his head, but she felt that it was not good to get too close, so she retracted her hand that was half reaching out. She looked at him and said, "I will come back and bring you along after I have confirmed my matter."

.....She couldn't let someone who was about to die in an accident in the following year out of her sight, right?

Wen Yu fixed his gaze on her for a while before suddenly grabbing her hand. He pried her fingers apart and hooked his pale and skinny pinky with her pinky.

Then, he raised his head and smiled towards her. A smile that was innocent, warm and filled with trust.

Chapter 21

21: Old Friend

A few days later at the Orchid Theater

"Next."

"Director, give me another chance!"

"Next!"

Audition, failure, leaving in dejection, Ning Ning was very familiar with this scenario.

She walked in the door. The auditioner looked up from behind the table, his gaze penetrating from behind his glasses.

Ning Ning arrived late, most of the characters have been decided. But she wasn't too late, because the most important female lead had not been decided. Amidst the gaze of the auditioner, she straightened her posture. She had had make up done before arriving, so as to make herself look more mature, because she was only eighteen that year, while the character design for the Phantom stated that she was a woman who was in her late 20s.

As such, the auditioner also only took a glance at her before looking down, "Next"

Ning Ning didn't want to leave just like this. She wanted to at least look at the script, look at the actors, look at a scene, to see if the <<Phantom of the Theater>> here was the same as the <<Phantom of the Theater>> In reality.

But the daily auditions seemed to have made the auditioner impatient, he looked up at Ning Ning and repeated his words, "Next"

The door behind her opened, a commotion rang out from behind her. She looked back and saw a couple who were dressed fashionably at the door. The young man in a grey suit was acting mature with a cigarette in his mouth, but his body language reeked of a rich hedonistic brat. He held the waist of the woman beside him and smiled to the auditioner, "You do not need to pick anymore, I found the most suitable candidate, come, Qiao Qiao, greet the Director."

"Hi, Director!" The woman who was dressed like a socialite

puckered her scarlet red lips and blew the Director a kiss.

"Disqualified, next." The auditioner who was also the director of the film coldly replied.

"Aiya, what's wrong with her?" The young man immediately defended her. After the socialite elbowed him a few times, he scanned the room then pointed at Ning Ning and said, "At least she's better than this, right?"

Ning Ning looked at him and was shocked.

"What is it?" The young man misjudged her expression, smiled and touch his face. "Why are you looking at me in such a provocative way?"

Because Ning Ning had already recognised him.

"Chen Guan Chao!" The socialite pinched his waist and angrily said, "You said you loved me! This is how much you love me? Flirting with whores right in front of me."

She took a look at Ning Ning and laughed, "A whore that is not even as pretty as me."

But Ning Ning ignored her, she was utterly fixated on the young man.

Although he was much younger, much more frivolous, much more...idiotic, but he was definitely Director Chen. Director Chen from 1988, the scriptwriter and male lead of <<Phantom of the Theater>>, Chen Guan Chao!

Since she had identified him, she had more reasons not to just leave!

Ning Ning quickly scanned her surroundings. In the midst of The Socialite's exclamation, she rushed to a window and tore down the curtain. With a flapping sound, the thick dark blue curtain draped on her body like a cloak, the edges of the curtain slowly floated down and wrapped around her body.

Before anyone could chase her out, Ning Ning raised her right hand, slowly covering her face, as if she had worn a half face mask. An extremely mocking smile appeared on her other side of the face, she exclaimed at Chen Guan Chao, "This is your new flame?"

She squinted her eyes and looked at the socialite with a picky and sharp expression. It looked like love rivals sizing up one another, but it also looked like Chen Guan Chao's mother measuring a newly-wedded daughter-in-law.

It was apparent that the old lady was not satisfied with her son's taste in women.

"Arrogant boy, this slave of fashion."

"Ignorant fool, this bold suitor."

You have the cheek to long for my flower of victory!"

One of the singing segments for < <Phantom of the Opera> > -
< <The Mirror> >

Female lead Christine's debut on stage was a huge success. At the same time, she had received the favour and an invitation of Viscount Chagny. As she got dressed to get ready for the meeting, the Phantom's singing voice rang out from the mirror behind her, degrading the Viscount contemptuously, then luring the female lead to enter the mirror.

"You want to give me up for her?" Ning Ning smiled at Chen Guan Chao, she slowly reached out a hand from underneath the curtain, just like a priest extending the back of his palm to a follower, "Christine."

She was full of self-confidence, she was aloof, as if she was certain the other party would not go against her will for just an ordinary man. Because she was his teacher who taught him how to sing, molding him from a mere newcomer into a musical angel, making him turn into the theater's main star, she was the Phantom of the Opera.

"What is she on about?" the socialite pouted. As she turned around, she bumped into a suit jacket.

Chen Guan Chao loosened his collar, then walked over in reverence, knelt down on one knee in front of her, as if he was a follower seeking forgiveness from his priest, putting his forehead on the back of her hand. Ning Ning was not well versed in musicals, so she recited the previous lines. But he replied by singing in the same delivery as a musical, "Please don't abandon me, teacher.."

When he was done, he looked up with a smile and blinked at the Director, "How was it?"

The Director furrowed his brows and remained silent with his arms crossed.

"I told you, the Phantom should be a woman!" Chen Guan Chao lept from the ground, ran to the Director and put his arm around his shoulders. "Previously you were unwilling to compromise, citing a lack of suitable candidates, don't we have one right now?"

Under both their gazes, Ning Ning was slightly shocked.

What was going on? The current Phantom for <<Phantom of the Theater>> was not female?

Ning Ning carefully recalled the recruitment advertisement in the newspaper, apparently it really wasn't. The advertisement only stated that the adaptation of <<Phantom of the Opera>> titled <<Phantom of the Theater>> will begin filming, they need a female lead, female supporting role and several crowd actors. It did not state what the lead female character was, which meant to say, the current female lead this movie was lacking was very likely to not be the Phantom, but the female lead character Christine from the original works?

".....the risk is still too big." The director was still showing signs of hesitation, "If the difference from the original work is too big, it would definitely be chewed out by the critics..."

"So what, movies are made for the audience anyway, they are not made for critics." Chen Guan Chao had a look of indifference, "Controversy creates interest, the most important thing is....."

Ning Ning pricked her ears up beside them.

<<Phantom of the Theater>> was both Director Chen's first work and a failed piece of work. The end result was just like what the two of them discussed. It was heavily criticised by the critics, but because of the controversy the movie remained relevant for quite a long time. Even up until now there were still quite a number of people talking about why he would adapt such a masterpiece in such a way, why did he have to flip the genders of the male and female lead characters.

"I don't have to play an ugly character." The young Chen Guan Chao seriously stated, "As compared to the ugly Phantom, I'm more suited to play a handsome actor!"

As he finished, he struck what he felt was a dashing pose and winked at the Director and Ning Ning. "After all, I am so pretty hahahahaha."

Director, "..."

Ning Ning, "..."

.....Where was the video camera!! She wanted to record this moment and bring it back to the present! It would topple the viewpoints of the people who were still digging for the meaning for swapping the male and female character roles of <<Phantom of the Theater>>.

The Director took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He might have teared a bit. Before putting his glasses back on, he agreed to Chen Guan Chao's suggestion. "Alright, I also feel that from all aspects you are more suited to be the female lead....."

Ning Ning felt that he was talking about Chen Guan Chao's mental capacity...

"No no no, I am not going to cross dress as the female lead. I want to be this. Lu Yun He, after losing his fortunes he wandered into a theater and became an actor. Handsome and talented, with eyes that could kill and the voice of an angel. Even if he was to fall into a swamp, he would retain a heart that was as pure as a lotus flower.." Chen Guan Chao took out his script from his suit pocket and pointed it out word for word to the Director. This was probably a first draft, and not the final finished product Ning Ning had seen. She felt a little thrilled although she didn't know what was written on the draft. As the Director read it, tears once again rolled down his cheek...

"What about me?" The Socialite came over at this moment and said to Chen Guan Chao sweetly, "Didn't we agree on letting me be the female lead?"

"Of course you are the female lead baby. Chen Guan Chao told her Intimately, "A wealthy and pretty lady, do you like this character?"

The Socialite answered, "This lady loves it!"

Chen Guan Chao added, "It's just that her looks is slightly worse than mine."Socialite, "..."

Ning Ning watched the scenes unfold as a bystander. A narcissistic scriptwriter cum male lead, a socialite female lead, a teary-eyed director...she now knew why the movie flunked so hard.

"...Hello..." A timid voice suddenly rang out, it had a hint of hesitation and an extremely low self-confidence. "Is this the audition for <<Phantom of the Theater>>? No, do you...still need people?"

Ning Ning and the rest looked over where the voice was coming from. They saw a half-opened door, a woman was hiding behind it. She had a beautiful appearance, was in her early 20s. She was wearing a white shirt and black pants and sported a single-braided pigtail. She looked unsophisticated, her face had the fear and anticipation of someone who had left a small county to see the world.

Director and Chen Guan Chao had seen a lot of these kinds of people over the past few days, so they had no reaction upon seeing her. Chen Guan Chao even waved his hand at her impatiently, "No no,

please leave."

But when Ning Ning saw her, her movements and voice completely stopped. Her appearance was like a slow motion video, every frame brought the beautiful luster of yearning, sentiment, love and nostalgia. Everything reflected in Ning Ning's eyes, tears slowly blurred her vision.

Her heart shouted softly, "Mama..."

"You don't need anyone anymore?" The young Ning Yu Ren didn't even have the courage to argue. She looked down disappointingly. As she was about to turn around and leave, someone behind her held her back.

"Let her audition." Ning Ning told director and Chen Guan Chao, then turned back and looked at Ning Yu Ren with slightly red eyes. She said with a smile, "Let them see your acting."

Ning Yu Ren was slightly at a loss. She was pulled in front of everyone by Ning Ning. Chen Guan Chao rolled his eyes and said, "Then do the confession scene to the male lead."

Ning Yu Ren trembled and looked at Chen Guan Chao, then she looked at Ning Ning while still trembling. As if she drew some courage from Ning Ning's gaze, Ning Yu Ren took a few deep breaths, then suddenly looked up, flared her nostrils, glared and rushed towards Chen Guan Chao like a raging bear running down a mountain while shouting, "I LOVE YOU AHHH!!"

Chen Guan Chao, "..."

Ning Ning, "..."

Chapter 22

22: Old Home

"Change, change scene... You are meeting with the lover of the male lead."

Ning Yu Ren flared her nostrils, glared and shouted with all her might, "I am so jealous of you! Why does he love you but not me!"

"Don't come here, don't come here, change to the break up scene."

Ning Yu Ren still flared her nostrils, glared and shouted with all her might, "I hate you! I was with you for so long! You actually want to break up with me?"

Can't you use another expression? Besides flaring your nostrils, flaring your nostrils and flaring your nostrils, do you not have any other expressions?"

Ning Yu Ren turned red, she tried very hard to regulate her next expression, then flared her nostrils, glared and shouted with all her might, "How is it now? Is it better?"

Chen Guan Chao raised his hands to surrender, then took out his wallet and handed a note over to her, I will pay for your transportation, please go back to wherever you came from."

Ning Yu Ren did not take his money, she looked down and fought her tears.

"Hold on." Ning Ning suddenly rushed over and pulled her outside.

With such poor acting skills, this couldn't be her mother. Ning Ning knew deep down that this was a movie. Although it was said to be adapted from a true story, a lot of things were just not right Director Chen was not like Director Chen, Mama was not like Mama, a lot of things were weird....

At a corner with no one around, Ning Ning let go of her hand then turned around and looked at the person behind her.

This face as long as she saw this face, she would not be able to deny that this was all real. "Who are you?" Ning Ning asked gently.

The other person was surprised. "I am Ning Yu Ren..."

"No!" Ning Ning was flustered by the interruption even though she was the one who interrupted Ning Yu Ren mid-sentence. She didn't even know where to place her hands and feet. She licked her lips and cautiously told Ning Yu Ren, "There is no such person in the script. Who are you? Phantom of the Theater? Wealthy Lady? Stage performer? Spectator of the play? Before...before you act, you have to characterise yourself - who are you?"

Ning Ning was too nervous, she even made Ning Yu Ren felt nervous she stuttered, "I, I, I, I don't know."

"How about the Phantom?" Ning Ning's eyes twinkled and smiled feverishly. "Of course it's the Phantom, it has to be the phantom! The other characters are not good enough for you! Wealthy Lady? The former star of the theater? No no no, even I could act as these characters, not to mention the other miscellaneous characters.."

She paused her speech because she saw Ning Yu Ren took a few steps back, the expression she had while looking at Ning Ning was slightly filled with fear.

"...I'm sorry, I was overzealous." Ning Ning said, her left hand grabbing her right armpit, fingers forcefully pinching her flesh, reminding herself with the pain, *'it's not real, nothing is real, none of this is real at all.'*

...But even if it was fake, even if it was just a fake person who looked like her mother, she could not resist treating her well. This might be a kind of self comfort, but what did it matter?

"Don't be scared." Ning Ning looked at her with a smile. I won't harm you, I only want to help you."

I will help you, because helping you would be like helping my mother. For you to live well, is like me watching my mother live well.

"O, okay..." Ning Yu Ren nodded her head repeatedly. She looked like she didn't really believed Ning Ning and only did so because she was afraid of her. I believe you..."

Ning Ning immediately turned cheerful, reaching out and covering Ning Yu Ren's eyes while gently saying. Then we will do this again." Ning Yu Ren shivered a little when Ning Ning's fingers touched her. "What, what are we doing?"

The three scenes you just did, let me demonstrate them once-as the Phantom." Ning Ning did not move her hands which seemingly lack temperature, she only lowered her voice. Most of the time the Phantom would not reveal himself directly to another person. His

presence was represented by his voice, so you have to take note of your vocalisation..."

She had learned this from Chen Jun Yan. He was an expert on using his voice. He could portray the same sentence with a difference voice and emotion based on the environment and his needs. He he, now that she thought about it, his sweet talks were always laced with lies.

"Come, listen to me carefully." Ning Ning slowly got closer to Ning Yu Ren and repeated the three sentences from before with different voices and emotions.

"I love you."

"I am jealous of you."

"I hate you."

Goosebumps appeared on Ning Yu Ren's body as the last three words were spoken.

Ning Ning was still unwilling to let her go, she gently laughed, "Come, give it a try. Ning Yu Ren bit her pale lips, then opened her trembling mouth.

"I love you!"

"I am jealous of you."

"I hate you."

Not far from this, the Director and Chen Guan Chao had witnessed everything.

"Such a waste of time." Chen Guan Chao didn't express any opinion on Ning Yu Ren's performance, he felt that Ning Ning performed better. "The gap between the two of them is too wide."

"That is because you have not met a lot of people." The Director gazed at Ning Yu Ren. Instead, then tugged Chen Guan Chao and signalled for him to leave together so that the girls wouldn't hear what he had to say next. "You favour Wen Xiao Ning. She is indeed not bad, but she has a fatal flaw. So on the contrary, favour Ning Yu Ren more. She does have a lot of flaws but she has a very outstanding merit..."

"What merit? Why can't I see it?" Chen Guan Chao asked in a straightforward manner, "Don't tell me you've gone senile?"

The Director clenched down on the script in his hands. It was a feat for this did to be able to live this long, if he was not the son of an old friend and the investor of this film, the Director would have long

pushed him into the wall in front and throw a few rocks down.

"Just wait and see." The Director had wanted to tell him the reason, but suddenly decided not to. He didn't want to be straightforward with Chen Guan Chao anymore. He turned and glanced towards the direction of the two girls and downplayed it, "The preparations will require three to four months anyway, just put the two of them together. We will at most get them to phase two of the training, all the merits and flaws would reveal themselves."

Thus, both Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren received the notification that both of them had passed the selection and became the reserve actresses for the role of the Phantom. They had to live in Orchid Theater, there would be specialised drama teachers who will teach them everything about performing arts, allowing them to be closer to the characterisation of the Phantom.

Ning Yu Ren's lessons were more comprehensive in comparison because just arrived from a county. She still had the accent of someone from the countryside. The Director had insisted for her not to be dubbed over, so she had to have an extra lesson in speech correction. When the timetables were given out, Ning Yu Ren took a look and was almost suffocated, but what was even more suffocating was...looking at Ning Ning who was beside her.

"Orchid Theater is very well-established, before the theater was built, this used to be a big house during the Republic."

Along with Chen Guan Chao's introduction, Ning Ning walked into the courtyard. Although most of the things had been torn down, there were still some broken tiles left. She quietly stood under a very very old plum tree, reaching out and touching the rugged tree trunk. The branches were empty, without leaves or flowers.

"Then the war started, so my grandfather took his whole family to America. The reason he let me come back this time was not only to invest in the construction of his homeland, but also to buy this place over... I guess this was bought as a souvenir. Chen Guan Chao strutted in front of them and opened a door to a room in front.

"Oh em gee, this place is so rundown." The Socialite followed them into the door while dragging along her luggage. She looked at the surroundings and immediately furrowed her brows. "You can bear to let me stay in this kind of place?"

"This was actually the boudoir of the eldest young mistress, although it was the eldest daughter of a kidnapper" Chen Guan Chao stumbled. He looked at what he had stepped on then gave it a kick,

the thing rolled all the way to the feet of Ning Ning. She looked down and picked it up, it was the head of a blonde doll. Due to the passage of time, one of its blue eyes were missing, the once dazzling blonde hair had already faded and withered.

Besides the Socialite, a few other people who agreed to accept the closed door training began to place their luggage in the room. The Socialite folded her arms and looked at them, looked over to Chen Guan Chao and said, "Is there no better, cleaner room?"

"There's none." Chen Guan Chao said, "This is the best room here, even the kidnapper's room cannot be compared to this."

"What do you mean by kidnapper?" Ning Ning suddenly asked.

Someone finally asked! I can finally brag about the glorious achievements of my ancestors! Chen Guan Chao laughed out loud, struck a cool pose and told the crowd, "My grandfather and grandmother were once kidnapped by the kidnapper. There were a lot more people who were also kidnapped, one of them was the grandson of a shipping tycoon. It was all due to the resourcefulness of my grandfather that they managed to destroy the nest of the evil kidnapper and the circus that he owned, hence saving everyone!"

"What happened to the eldest young mistress?" The Socialite asked.

"She died." Chen Guan Chao laughed, "She was burned to death by my grandmother along with her father."

"Oh em gee? People had died here?" The Socialite shrunk her shoulders, she was even more unwilling to stay here, Then, then think will stay in another room!"

There were a lot of rooms left anyway, so Chen Guan Chao brought her to another room and spent some time to console her. When he came back he had lipstick on his face which he failed to clean up properly. He lifted the chins of Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren, "Follow me."

He brought them to the cellar. Ning Yu Ren reached out and swatted the spider web in front of her and trembled, "What, what have you brought us here for?"

"The two of you will stay here. Even Chen Guan Chao himself choked on the dust and coughed. He rubbed his nose, and said with a little nasally voice, "The Phantom had lived below the theater all their life, passing days without seeing daylight, cough. I feel that allowing you two to live somewhere similar.. cough, cough will let you better grasp the Phantom's mental state. Cough, cough, cough. Forget it! will

get someone to clean this place up tomorrow! As of now... cough, cough, cough, cough! It's impossible to live in!"

He turned around and wanted to walk away. After taking a few steps, he turned back as he held his flashlight, shaking a beam of white light at what was in front of him, "Hey, what are you doing?"

In the darkness, Ning Ning stood beside a coffin. She reached out and brushed off the dust on it, then gently asked, "What is this?"

Chen Guan Chao had two fingers on his forehead, groaned like he was constipated, had an epiphany and finally said with a snap of his fingers, "I remember now. My grandmother told me, the kidnapper had a servant with the surname Wang who had always been accumulating savings for the coffins for her two masters. She even wanted to reclaim their ashes. After my grandmother found out about it, she ordered someone to beat her to death. Ha, didn't expect her to have saved enough for her coffin, just that she couldn't use it for the kidnapper nor herself?

Ning Ning's hand which was brushing off the dust stopped in its tracks. She mumbled in the darkness, is that so? Wang Ma is already dead..."

Chen Guan Chao didn't put two and two together, but Ning Yu Ren trembled a little. Chen Guan Chao only said that the servant's surname was Wang, but he didn't say whether the servant was a male or female, why did Ning Ning address them as Wang Ma?

"Let's go, I will get someone to remove the coffin tomorrow and bring beds for the two of you," Chen Guan Chao shined the flashlight on Ning Ning, "Why are you not leaving?"

"...leave?" Ning Ning laughed, "Isn't this place, just right for sleeping?"

That laughter was mournful, it had hints of a cry, echoing in the cellar, not dissipating for a while.

On another look, Ning Ning had already slowly opened the lid of the coffin, bowed down and inspected it. It was as if she would fall head first in the next second. Two breaths were simultaneously taken, Chen Guan Chao and Ning Yu Ren looked at each other, then noisily rushed out of the door.

Chapter 23

23: Old Dream

"Wa!" Chen Guan Chao vomitted just as he ran out of the cellar.

Ning Yu Ren who was slightly slower than him, "..."

When he had finally finished vomiting, Chen Guan Chao knelt on the floor. He held himself and shivered. "She is so scary! Ghosts are my greatest fear!"

Ning Yu Ren muttered, "...So timid, how are you even going to shoot a thriller?"

Chen Guan Chao's face was flushed, he turned around and glared at her, "You're not scared? Then go back and stay with her!"

Ning Yu Ren shook her head without thinking, her teeth chattering, *brrr...*

Chen Guan Chao basked under the sun for a while. Feeling that his yang energy¹ was recharged, his courage returned. He stood up and pointed at Ning Yu Ren, arrogantly passing judgement, "Let me tell you, you won't beat her as you are now!"

Ning Yu Ren was stunned.

"There will only be one Phantom candidate!" Chen Gao Chao laughed, raised his arm and pointed towards the cellar, "By the looks of it, she is more like the Phantom than you, isn't she?"

Ning Yu Ren slowly turned pale.

On the second day, Chen Guan Chao had people clean up the rooms and the cellar. Ning Yu Ren grabbed her basic supplies and hesitated for a while in the sparkling clean room, eventually walking down to the cellar resolutely.

...During the night, she was worried about not being able to sleep, needing to use the washroom...

Two coffins were placed side by side in the cellar. Ning Yu Ren pressed her ear on the inner wall of the coffin for a while. She didn't hear Ning Ning. She gulped and turned on the flashlight, then softly and quietly climbed out of the coffin she was in. Suddenly, she felt that there was something weird beside her. She slowly turned her

head and looked over. She saw that in the coffin beside her sat a woman whose hair was draped over her face looking at her.

"It's a ghost!!!" Ning Yu Ren screamed and ran out of the cellar.

"No, I'm not a ghost." Ning Ning pulled her hair back, revealing a face full of tears and mucus. "I couldn't sleep because of a nightmare,.. *sob, snifle...*"

Ning Yu Ren returned very late into the night. She tossed and turned after returning, not sleeping a wink that night. She continued to avoid Ning Ning after she had woken up, looking like she was a little afraid of her.

Ning Ning didn't know why Ning Yu Ren was so scared of her, but she soon found out, it was not only Mama, the rest of the people were also afraid of her.

Till one day she overheard someone else gossiping about her.

"Don't you guys feel that..." There was a pile of fruits and sunflower seeds, the Socialite was telling everyone as she was munching on a sunflower seed, "That person, Wen Xiao Ning, is a little weird!"

"A little. There was once I woke up in the middle of the night to visit the washroom, I saw her walking around the courtyard, laughing and crying to the plum tree."

"Oh em gee, you saw that too? Actually I've seen that as well, but it was not to the plum tree. She was carrying the head of a doll, talking to it as she combed its hair."

When someone returned to their old home, they would inevitably be overwhelmed with emotions. Ning Ning's heart maintained that every blade of grass and every chunk of wood was a piece of memory, a person could not help but laugh and cry.

"Hey..." The Socialite suddenly called everyone over and said in a low voice, "Do you guys think that...she is a human or a ghost?"

The rest of the people collectively took a breath, one of them mocked, "How could a ghost walk under the sun?"

"But have you ever seen her eat warm rice?" The Socialite asked. "I have never seen it. She had never eaten anything hot. Not warm rice, not hot soup, not even hot water.

"That's right. She had never taken a hot shower either, she always uses cold water."

"She also doesn't sleep on a bed and prefers to sleep in a coffin."

"Oh em gee, let's stop talking about it, I'm getting goosebumps..."

"So to say, how could a normal person....." as the Socialite was about to make a conclusion, her voice suddenly stopped. She turned around and looked towards a direction.

Seeing that she had been found out, Ning Ning could only walk towards them from where she was. No one spoke for a moment. As she walked past the group of people, an unidentified voice from behind softly called out, "Monster."

Ning Ning stopped in her tracks, then continued walking forward with her lunchbox.

She was not in a hurry to eat after she got back to the cellar. The lunchbox was placed on the table and left open to let it cool down. It was not that she liked having cold food, but the trauma from the previous movie caused her to be completely incapable of touching anything hot.

They were right. How could a normal person live their life like this. She switched on a table lamp to illuminate the mirror. The face (reflected) in the mirror was that of a dead person. Pale, gloomy, lifeless, it looked like another spiderweb in the dark cellar at a glance.

This was not her, it was...

"Qu Ning'er." Ning Ning gently called out.

Qu Ning'er smiled at her from within the mirror. Innocent yet evil, the smile was laced with a madness stemmed from deeply accumulated grievances

"...You are a fake. An illusion created from me going overboard with method acting." Ning Ning stared at the mirror and calmly said, "A type of cognitive dissonance, a leftover trauma from diving too deep into the character. You do not exist and will eventually disappear with the passage of time."

"I won't disappear." In the mirror, Qu Ning'er raised a finger up to the front of her lips as if she was telling a secret. She told Ning Ning furtively, "I'm home."

Ning Ning quickly closed her eyes, her heart beating very loudly.

She was currently in a very dangerous situation. Seemingly because she returned to Qu family's old house, not only was she seeing things, she was also hearing things. Her old home had not only awakened her memories, but also the Qu Ning'er within her.

"...Go away." Ning Ning kept her eyes closed and clenched her teeth, "Your movie had ended. You should disappear, disappear already! Leave my body!!"

"...I won't leave." Although she could not see Qu Ning'er, her voice rang out beside her ears, sobbing, "Papa is dead, Wang Ma is dead, I only have you left,.. sob sob.. I will never leave you! Never!!"

...This was a nightmare, once it started there was no end ...

It seemed that for the sake of consoling Ning Ning, Qu Ning'er continued to cling onto Ning Ning's body, refusing to leave. Even though Qu Ning'er created a lot of trouble for Ning Ning she also gave her a benefit — the best gift to an actor.

"What a good performance!" Chen Guan Chao was being generous with his praise and applauded while he said, "Simply a great performance! It's exactly like a real spirit!"

"...What did you say?" Ning Ning turned around, "Come a little closer I didn't get all of that."

"...Oh." Chen Guan Chao who was 30 meters away jogged over, but he still did not dare to get too close to Ning Ning, standing three steps away from her. He raised the script in his hands and said, "I wrote a new scene based on your situation. We rehearse it later, see how it goes?"

He didn't wait for Ning Ning's response when he was done and immediately turned back and called the others over. Very quickly, a rowdy group of people came over. Almost half a month had gone by, everyday was extremely dry training sessions, everyone wanted to have some fun. They were also willing to accommodate the investor who was also the male lead, Director Chen.

Ning Ning also felt that she had been too high strung recently and needed to relax a bit, so she smiled at him. "Alright, let me have a look at the script."

The title for this scene was — < <The Ghost's Victory> > .

This was a chase scene. The Wealthy Lady sneaked into the theater at midnight. She had wanted to give Lu Yun He a surprise, but accidentally discovered that he was with another woman. Thinking that he had a change of heart, the Wealthy Lady flew off the handle, immediately rushed over with the intention to grab that woman.

But in the process of it, somehow their positions had switched. The woman ended up chasing the Wealthy Lady and finally caused her to

fall down the stairs. The Wealthy Lady raised her head in pain. As she looked at the top of the stairs, a shadowy figure of the ghost was singing a song to her with a mocking victorious smile.

Ning Ning put down the script. "That's it?"

You had the cheek to say that you wrote a new scene with such little words? Were you not afraid that the readers and audience would call you a shorty?

"I'm short on inspiration, damn it!" Chen Guan Chao was not ashamed, but proudly urged, "Quickly act it out you guys, let me find some inspiration!"

You are the investor, whatever you say goes!

The stage was quickly set up. Should Chen Guan Chao be described as a perfectionist, or was he just lenient to himself and strict toward others? Anyway, he just had high expectations of others. It was just a provisional scene, but everything had to be done in the best possible way. Even the standing copper mirror that was for the actual shoot was moved onto the stage for him. He put two fingers together and dashingy swung them towards the stage, "Begin!"

The Socialite handed her parasol to her attendant beside her and went on the stage with a smile. She felt that it was too sunny after a while, so she took the parasol back, but before she could open it, Chen Guan Chao angrily shouted, "Put it down!!"

The Socialite was stunned, she said coquettishly, "The sun is so bright today, this lady's skin will get too tanned."

Chen Guan Chao walked over without saying anything, snatched her parasol over and broke it over his knee, then stared at her. "Listen well, this scene happened at night! There was no sun, there wasn't even a moon! Would a few stars give you sunburn?"

The Socialite was frightened by him and didn't dare to talk back. Ning Ning looked at him and felt an indescribable familiarity, because Director Chen from the real world was like this as well. He could joke around with people normally, but once the filming started, he would become a film set tyrant.

Chen Guan Chao threw away the broken parasol, then turned around and shook his fingers. "Begin!"

The Socialite was a smart person, she knew when to be coquettish and when to be serious. Looking at Ning Ning on stage, she did not deign to hide the jealousy and hatred in her heart. She shouted at her,

"Who are you? What is your relationship with him?"

Like how the Wealthy Lady was jealous of the Phantom, she was also jealous of Ning Ning. Maybe Ning Ning didn't feel it, but she knew. Chen Guan Chao paid a lot of attention to Ning Ning. Although he said that he only cared about her acting, but who knew if he was telling the truth?

Men were sometimes more fickle than women, a little attention might develop into good feelings.

Ning Ning had not readied herself, but the Socialite had already threw herself at her. Ning Ning hastily dodged, then started to run around the stage.

Something was wrong.

Something was very wrong.

After running for a few minutes, Ning Ning slowly started to feel that something was off.

It was night time, they were at the theater, although it was not that they couldn't see, but her vision was not clear. If a person that was not from the theater were to run here, they would inevitably bump into stuff. There was no way they would move the same way as they would during the day.

But the Socialite did not act like she had any problems with her vision. She followed behind Ning Ning tightly, almost catching her a few times. When she saw Ning Ning turned back, she would smile at her, a victor's smile.

Ning Ning suddenly understood.

A loophole existed in the script.

All Chen Guan Chao wrote was "In the process of the chase, the positions of the two characters switched." But he didn't write at which point it happened, the reason why their positions had switched.

So the Socialite had the power to decide, the chase would stop whenever she wanted it to stop. Their positions would switch whenever she wanted to switch. She was the cat, Ning Ning was the mouse. She had completely become the lead actress of this scene!

"Little mouse!" The Socialite looked at Ning Ning and coldly laughed in her heart, "A Phantom who could be caught by a mortal, would that still qualify as a Phantom? No, the moment you are caught, you are no longer the Phantom. No! You were never the

Phantom! You are only someone who lived in fear in the cellar, a little mouse who cannot be seen in the light!"

The Socialite suddenly threw herself forward, but Ning Ning dodged sideways. The moment they locked eyes, Ning Ning suddenly jumped off the stage, and ran out of the set.

The Socialite stopped for a while, she hesitated while looking at the direction Ning Ning ran off to, not knowing whether to give chase. But right at this moment Chen Guan Chao shouted from beside her, "What are you doing? If I don't say cut, the scene doesn't end! Chase her!"

The Socialite could only jump off the stage and chased after Ning Ning.

She originally thought Ning Ning ran off because she could not handle the pressure the Socialite was giving her, or one could say that she had hoped Ning Ning would do this, then look for a place with no one and cry like a loser. But Ning Ning had stopped in front, like she was deliberately waiting for her. Once she got close, Ning Ning turned and ran again.

"What is she doing?" The Socialite was full of doubt, "Where is she leading me?"

Ning Ning stopped at the entrance of the cellar, turned and glanced at the Socialite, then slowly walked down the cellar.

"So she ran home to cry." The Socialite felt happy, she couldn't help but reveal a victor's smile on her face. For the sake of seeing Ning Ning cry in person, she followed her down the cellar.

Then, with a wham, the cellar door behind her closed.

The light had been extinguished, the surroundings turned dark. The Socialite stopped in her footsteps. As she looked back at the door, someone blew at her neck. She gasped and grabbed her neck, but she then heard a chuckle not far away, filled with evil intentions, filled with ridicule.

"You have come into my house." The voice told her in a low voice, "Get out, or.....stay here forever!"

Chapter 24

24: The Ghost's Victory

"Wen Xiao Ning! What are you trying to pull?" The Socialite shouted angrily while covering the back of her neck.

Laughter echoed from the back of the room again. Near yet far, sad yet happy. The Socialite couldn't help but take one step back, because after the laughter, that voice questioned her with evil intent, "Then who are you? What relationship do you have with him?"

This sentence blurred the lines of acting and reality. The Socialite momentarily could not differentiate whether the person questioning her was Ning Ning or the Phantom. She was also unclear as to whether she was the Socialite, or the Wealthy Lady.

"I am his girlfriend!" The Socialite shouted angrily, "Who do you think you are? A small time actress who came from nowhere, you still want to turn people against me?"

"Although I am only an unpopular actress, but he seems to pay more attention to me?" The voice tsked twice, "Oh em gee, are you angry? What's there to be angry about..."

The voice got closer to the Socialite. It was close enough that she could just reach out and grab it. It told her slowly, "Whether what I said was true or not, wouldn't your heart know best?"

The Socialite pounced on the voice angrily, but ended up tripping on the coffin at her feet.

She exclaimed as she fell into the coffin. Before she could stand up, someone had closed the lid to the coffin above her.

"What are you doing?"

"Let me out! Let me out!"

"Ah ah ah ah ah!"

When Chen Guan Chao and the others arrived, a flashlight was pointed in front of them. It showed a coffin that was shaking non-stop, Ning Ning was sitting on it with her hair draped over her face. She was singing while clapping like a child, the lyrics of her song were a little weird. Upon a closer listen, it sounded like, "Kidnapees, pick

your wooden puppet..."

No one dared to speak for a while. Chen Guan Chao waited for her to repeat the song two more times before he shouted, "Cut!"

Ning Ning shivered, turned around and looked at them. It was like she had just woken up from a dream. Before she could speak, she was already covered in sweat.

She got off from the coffin, turned around and opened the coffin lid. The Socialite had cried her eyes out inside. After she was helped up, the Socialite clung onto Chen Guan Chao and wept, "She's too much, too much....."

Chen Guan Chao patted her back, suddenly his eyes sparkled. "Ah! I just got inspired."

Upon saying that, just like the parasol before, he tossed the Socialite to someone beside him, then rushed over to the table in the room. He switched on the table lamp, took out some pen and paper and started to write at a tremendous speed.

The crowd looked at each other. It was not just them, even the Socialite didn't know how to react at the moment. Should she continue to cry, or save some energy and cry later? Finally someone coughed and asked, "Young Master Chen, what do we do next?"

"Didn't I already say cut?" Chen Guan Chao answered impatiently without looking up, "How many times do I need to say it? Cut! Cut! Cut!! Alright you guys can leave, oh right..."

He suddenly turned his head and pointed at Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren with the fountain pen in his hand, "The two of you stay behind. I have another new inspiration, I am about to finish the scene I'm writing. The three of us will rehearse it later. "

The Socialite was unwilling to leave just like this. She snuggled up close to Chen Guan Chao and grabbed his arm. In the end, Chen Guan Chao turned around and let out a long roar, "Ahhhhh! Quiet down!! Do not interrupt my thoughts!! Disappear for the time being for one two three four five six seven eight hours. Ahhhh!"

The Socialite had finally been chased away. He also began to furiously write while ignoring the people around him. Half an hour later, Ning Yu Ren looked at him awkwardly then looked at Ning Ning then reluctantly started a conversation, "You acted really well just now, you were like the real Phantom. I was scared."

"That wasn't the Phantom." Ning Ning suddenly said. She clenched

her fist tightly, sweat rolling down her cheeks, "That was not the Phantom at all....."

Just like the name of the scene—< <The Ghost's Victory> >, this was neither her victory nor the Phantom's victory. This was only Qu Ning'er's victory!

What was even scarier was that, this victory had made Qu Ning'er even stronger. She was close to losing control!

It was precisely at this juncture that Chen Guan Chao suddenly shouted, "I'm done writing!"

He laughed heartily at the sky, then handed the script over to Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren as if it was a treasure and laughed, "Look look! My thoughts that flowed like pee.....bah, that's wrong. I mean my thoughts that flowed like tsunamis and avalanches produced this!"

Ning Ning skimmed through the content and her heart sank.

The title for this scene was —< <Murder> > .

Lu Yun He and the Phantom had a big fight because the Wealthy Lady was hurt. The contradictory views of the two of them had finally become irreconcilable. Lu Yun He ran out of patience and finally proposed to break up with the Phantom. The Phantom, not being able to save this relationship, decided to kill Lu Yun He.

"If I can't have your heart, I can at least have your corpse." Ning Ning softly read the line.

"Actually this ending is also not bad, isn't it?" Chen Guan Chao lit a cigarette, put it in his mouth then smiled at her. "After all, love is the desire to monopolise ."

Ning Ning looked up at him in surprise, "... What do you think the ending of this love is?"

"Isn't it clear enough in the script?" Chen Guan Chao pointed at the script with the cigarette in his hand, smiled at Ning Ning and said, "The ending of this love is, destruction!"

The two of them looked at each other for a long time. It was so long that Chen Guan Chao touched his face, "What is it? Have you fallen for me? I have a girlfriend, oh, but I am recently starting to not be able to stand her..."

Ning Ning shook her head with a smile and thought, you really were a fake.

The real Director Chen would not say something like this. If true

love was monopolisation and the ending of love was destruction, then she would have passed the audition long ago. She wouldn't even appear here!

Ning Ning closed her eyes for a moment before opening them, "I cannot act in this scene."

Chen Guan Chao was stunned. "Why?"

'Because I'm about to lose control.' Was what Ning Ning thought. But she did not want to tell him the truth, so she turned around and looked at Ning Yu Ren. "She is also the Phantom, let her do it."

Chen Guan Chao looked at Ning Yu Ren as if he was smiling. He didn't know what the Director saw in this country bumpkin, he also didn't think there was any 'outstanding merit' on her. The only reason he let her stay, gave her chances to share the stage with Ning Ning, was so that she could see the difference between her and Ning Ning, back out early and stop wasting everyone's time.

The scene < <Murder> > was not only portraying the murder of Lu Yun He at the hands of the Phantom, it would also be his murder of Ning Yu Ren's acting career.

"That will do too." He threw the cigarette from his mouth to the ground and stepped on it. He smiled and said, "Then let's do it."

< <Murder> > thus began.

Ning Ning leaned on the wall and looked to the side with indifference. She wasn't a rookie, she had been in the show business for quite a number of years. Although she didn't have much accomplishments, she had seen the ugly side of things, that was why the more she watched the angrier she got — *Director Chen why do you do this! Your fake in this movie is also doing this!*

As a rookie who was still going through speech correction lessons, Ning Yu Ren felt inferior most of the time, especially because her role was the female lead. Although she was the reserve, a lot of people would talk behind her back. It would have been fine if she had excellent acting skills, but the problem was that she didn't, so the gossip got worse. Beside the Director, no one else in this movie thought well of her.

"You really want to pick,.. pick her?" Ning Yu Ren stammered a little, "How is she better than me?"

"She is better in every way." Chen Guan Chao gazed at her deeply. He was very eccentric. For the sake of putting down someone, he

actually temporarily stopped trying to be dashing and acted quite decently.

"It, it..." Ning Yu Ren suddenly forgot her lines. She hastily looked down at the script. She was about to continue with her lines, but Chen Guan Chao had snatched her lines from her, "Is it because she's prettier than you? No, I won't love an empty husk of a body, nor will I hate a scarred soul."

When two people were acting in a scene, the audience would focus more on the actor who was delivering the lines. If one actor had more lines the other would have less, and they would slowly fade into the background.

Although Ning Yu Ren worked very hard, the lines that belonged to her were taken from her one by one. However, she could not even criticise the other party, because from her rookie point of view, this was all because she had forgotten her lines. The other party was helping her out of the kindness of his heart.

In the end, besides a few other low impact lines, she was only left with one sentence from the entire scene.

"If I can't have your heart, I can at least have your corpse."

As Ning Yu Ren finished this sentence, when she was about to raise her hands to strangle his neck, she shivered and lowered her head to discover that Chen Guan Chao was already holding both her hands, slowly bringing them to his neck. He looked at her with an extremely complicated expression.

It looked like he hated everything she did but was also grateful for everything she did for him. He pitied her miserable experience in life, but at the same time, this pity caused him to not be able to give her deep love. All of this eventually became a drop of tear, rolling down his cheek, as if it was telling her, "Kill me, this way both of us will be set free."

Ning Yu Ren stared blankly at the tear on his cheek, until a hand reached out on the side and placed itself on Chen Guan Chao's hand. She turned around and saw Ning Ning standing beside them, coldly looking at Chen Guan Chao, "It's my turn."

< <Murder> >, take two.

Ning Yu Ren retreated back to the wall in a sorry state. She seized the opportunity to quickly wipe her tears as she lowered her head.

"Why is there such a gulf between people?" She thought sadly as

she looked at Ning Ning.

They were both clearly rookies with no acting experience, Ning Ning was even a little younger than her. But not only did she not have any deficiencies in her pronunciation, she had also never made any mistakes a rookie would. In Ning Yu Ren's eyes, the other party was simply perfect, she was a natural born actress.

The scariest and most respectable part was the amount of hard work she put in for the sake of acting.

"Do you have force yourself into this state just for the sake of portraying a character?" Ning Yu Ren thought, "For the sake of being a bit more like the Phantom, sleeping in a coffin, eating cold food, taking cold showers, not interacting with people, hiding in a dark cellar everyday... Can I do all these? Do I really need to do so much for the sake of one role? After making this much effort, will I be able to be just like her...a monster?"

Ning Yu Ren was still racking her brains when she suddenly heard painful sounds of a struggle. She looked up, her face turned pale from fright and screamed, "What are you doing??"

Ning Ning looked up at her and smiled. A smile that had childlike innocence and cruelty, like a child crushing ants with her fingers. As she smiled, she continued to mount on Chen Guan Chao's waist, lowered her head and strangled him.

Ning Yu Ren trembled.

That indifference was not an act at all.

It was real... A murder.

Chapter 25

25: Real (or) Fake

She had lost control.

Ning Ning was sitting on Chen Guan Chao's waist. She knew that what she was doing was wrong. She wanted to stop, but she couldn't stop, because Qu Ning'er's illusion had appeared behind her. Qu Ning'er's severely burnt hands reached out from behind her, grabbing her hands, helping her to viciously choke Chen Guan Chao.

"No!" Ning Ning shouted in her heart, "No! I cannot do this!"

"What does it matter?" Qu Ning'er placed her chin on Ning Ning's shoulder. She was becoming more and more real. Ning Ning could even feel the pain from Qu Ning'er's chin digging into her shoulder. "This is the movie world anyway. You can do whatever you like. It doesn't matter even if you kill him, he's not real anyway."

"Don't act like you're doing this for me!" Ning Ning said furiously, "You just want to use me to kill Chen Guan Chao because he is the grandson of Chen Jun Yan!"

After a moment of silence, Qu Ning'er laughed coldly. "Yes, I want to kill him! If I were still alive, my grandson would be as old as him. If I were still alive..."

Her hatred flowed out along with these words, flowing into the hands of Ning Ning, choking Chen Guan Chao with more force. Ning Ning had a malevolent expression on for a while, then she suddenly turned her head with difficulty, struggling as she told Ning Yu Ren, "Stop me."

Ning Yu Ren had already fallen to the floor from fright, she was speechless.

"I beg you..." Ning Ning shouted helplessly with a hint of a cry, "Quickly stop me!"

Ning Yu Ren leapt up from the ground upon getting shouted at. She reached out, felt a table lamp beside her and swung it with a yell. The table lamp hit Ning Ning's head, she fell to the floor with a grunt. After a while, she got up from the ground holding the wound on her head, her face had an expression of having a new lease of life, she smiled and asked, "Are you guys alright....."

"Don't come over!" Ning Yu Ren shrunk into a corner while hugging Chen Guan Chao. She was too scared that a phrase slipped from her mouth, "Monster!!"

Ning Ning was stunned, two streams of tears started flowing.

"I don't care if the others are scared of me, why are you also scared of me..." She looked at Ning Yu Ren blankly. "I don't care if others say that about me, why are you also saying that..."

"Because she, too, is fake." The hallucination reappeared. Qu Ning'er climbed onto her shoulder like a parasite and whispered in her ear, "Everything in this world is fake. Mama is fake, Director Chen is fake, you are fake too. Only my hatred is real."

The sound of footsteps came from behind Ning Ning, it broke off the voice of Qu Ning'er. Someone came down into the cellar and shouted into the room, "Wen Xiao Ning, someone is here for you."

Finally, she didn't have to listen to Qu Ning'er Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief, she raised her hands to wipe the tears on her face. "Coming."

She didn't dare to look at Ning Yu Ren again. She was even afraid of hearing Ning Yu Ren speak. She ran out of the cellar hastily. She squinted her eyes as she was greeted by the sunshine outside, feeling that everything in front of her eyes were not real.

"Is this world...real?" She mumbled, then looked down at her palms, "Am I... really a monster?"

It didn't matter if the world was real, she was still definitely a monster.

If Mama had not stopped her just now, wouldn't she be a murderer by now?

No. Even if she did not succeed, it was still an attempted murder. Currently Chen Guan Chao had not woken up. Once he woke up, she reckoned that she would be fired from the cast. She might even be imprisoned.

"Ha, I'm dead meat." Ning Ning laughed, she suddenly hugged herself with both arms, her fingers digging into her skin. She said maliciously with a distorted expression, "Come out! Come out! It's all your damn fault! Get out of here, get lost!"

A cry of fear sounded out in front of her. Ning Ning looked up at the direction of the sound, only to see that it was the Socialite. A plastic basin was at her feet, the water in the basin had spilled on the

floor, she was looking at Ning Ning with a face full of terror.

"What is it?" Ning Ning stared at her with bloodshot eyes, "Am I very scary?"

The Socialite turned tail and ran.

It was not just her, others also had similar reactions when they saw Ning Ning. They would either quickly run away, watch her from afar or point fingers at her. *What do you see?* Ning Ning looked at them fiercely. *What do you think I am? A ghost? A monster?*

The sunlight made her feel awful, their looks made her feel worse. At this time she really wanted to wrap herself in a cloak, to cover her face with a mask. That way, she wouldn't be seen by them, she wouldn't need to be subjected to being stared at this way. But she didn't have any of those, she could only use her hands to cover her face. She lowered her head and walked to the entrance of the theater.

Ning Ning froze on the spot due to the surprise she got from seeing who was waiting for her outside. "...How did you get here?"

Under the sunlight, Wen Yu turned around at lightning speed.

He looked a little dirty. Both his hair and face were dusty, causing him to look a little dull, but his eyes lit up the moment he saw Ning Ning. He ran towards her with open arms and jumped into her bosom, giving her a hug.

Ning Ning stood her ground silently. She looked down after a very long time and asked him, "...Are you not afraid of me?"

Wen Yu shook his head then opened his school bag and took out an exercise book. He flipped it open to a page and wrote a sentence on it before raising it up for her to read.

Ning Ning took the exercise book to look. Written on it was, 'You never came to look for me, so I came to look for you.'

She looked at him with a shock. He was looking up at her just like the day they said their farewells at the train station, with a warm and innocent smile full of trust.

"...You came at a bad time." Ning Ning smiled at him. "I just attempted a murder, I'm about to be arrested soon."

As soon as she finished, two men walked up from behind her. They grabbed her from each side. Wen Yu stayed on the spot blankly, then frantically chased after them.

Upon arriving at Chen Guan Chao's room, they heard a heated

argument coming from the inside. The Director's angry voice resonated from behind the door, "She is a dangerous character! To tell you the truth, her hatred runs too deep!"

Ning Ning stopped in her tracks.

"I don't know where that hatred comes from in spite of her young age, but I can tell, she has been using this hatred to act! I don't know who she was acting as, but it was not the Phantom!" The Director continued shouting, "The Phantom might push someone into a coffin, but would the Phantom sit on the coffin and sing a song while she clapped? No! That was not the Phantom! That was the departed spirit of a little girl!"

Experience counts indeed, you are absolutely right.

Ning Ning knocked on the door and went in. The two of them looked at her direction as she walked in, the Director said coldly, "You heard everything? If you were just poor at acting, I would still be able to tolerate you. But you have actually hurt someone! That is something I cannot tolerate..."

"I can tolerate it!" Chen Guan Chao shouted, forgetting the pain from his neck which had not healed. He looked feverishly at Ning Ning. "My Phantom needs you!!"

"I really should let you take a look at some experienced actors, old movie stars, it would prevent you from treating this blade of grass as a treasure!1" The director pointed at Ning Ning with a face full of resentment. "Look at her. There is only hatred in her acting. There is no love! Not even a shred! This is an actress with a fatal flaw!"

"I once had it." Ning Ning suddenly smiled, looking like she was playing it down, "I had once loved..."

The room went silent. After a while, little Wen Yu suddenly ran up to the Director from behind Ning Ning. He scribbled something on his exercise book and raised it up for the Director to see.

The Director read the words in the exercise book, then looked up at Ning Ning again and shook his head.

Wen Yu was not discouraged, he scribbled another sentence.

The Director took another look and shouted, "Who are you calling grandpa, call me uncle!2"

Wen Yu immediately looked down and struck it out, with a serious look he corrected his mistake like a primary school student. Once he was done he let the Director look at the words again.

A hand reached out from behind Wen Yu. He looked back and saw Ning Ning. He did not know when she had gotten behind him. She flipped through the exercise book, on it was written:

'She loves me a lot.

"Grandpa Uncle, I beg you, give her another chance.'

'She will not hurt anyone again. I guarantee it, because...'

The last part was not finished. Wen Yu took the exercise book back from her hands, he finished the last part with his puerile style of writing. The sentence was, 'Because I will live with her. If she is going to hurt anyone, it will only be me, she will not hurt anyone else.'

"...You don't have to make such sacrifice." The director sternly said.

Wen Yu shook his head. He held the hand beside him, looked up and smiled at Ning Ning. His smile told her, "Don't worry, don't be sad. There is still one person by your side in this world."

Ning Ning had never thought that this smile would actually give her another chance. One last chance. The Director had agreed to let her stay, on the condition that she could not perform too poorly for the rehearsal of the scene 'Looking up at Heaven' on the day after tomorrow. Back at the cellar, she sat on her coffin lid. < > and everything else that had happened after had exhausted all her energy. She looked at Wen Yu tiredly. "You don't have to make this kind of sacrifice."

Wen Yu who was covered in dirt looked a little tired too, he stayed close by her side, yawning a tiny little yawn.

"... Because I'm not afraid of him at all." Ning Ning turned back, her eyes staring emptily in front of her and smiled, "Because I have just finally understood, he is but a person in the movie."

Wen Yu looked at her puzzled.

"No matter how difficult he makes it for me, the movie will eventually end." Ning Ning mumbled, "It's the same for the others; no matter how much Mama hates me, the movie will eventually end; no matter how much Director Chen takes my side, the movie will eventually end; they are all fake, their feelings towards me are all fake... Everyone is fake, I would prefer it if they are all fake..."

She had rather believed that everything was fake, had rather believed that this was a movie, because if it was a movie, then no matter if it was Mama, Director Chen, Ning Qu'er or... Papa, they would all be nothing but actors.

"... I would prefer it if Papa was an actor." Ning Ning lowered her head and covered her face with her hands, she said in a low voice, "Then he would not have done so many wrongdoings, he would not have been burned to death, would not have been forced to kill his daughter with his own hands. He could go home after the movie had ended, could hug his wife, hug his real child, but if everything was real...ha, real? It was all fake, everything is fake.....he is fake, I am also fake..."

Ning Ning suddenly turned over and looked at Wen Yu coldly, "You are also fake."

Wen Yu was not frightened of her. He looked at her with pity. After a while, he grabbed her hands and gently brought her ice cold fingers to both his cheeks. He used a warm expression and his body temperature that she could actually feel to tell her: I am real.

Ning Ning was stunned looking at him.

He reached out with both his tiny hands and placed them on each side of her cheeks to tell her in the same way: You are also real.

1A Chinese idiom with the meaning of treating something useless as if it was a treasure

2Uncle and grandpa are terms in which younger Chinese people typically use to respectfully address older men, the terms are tied to how old the person is perceived to be, that was why the Director wanted to be addressed as uncle instead of grandpa.

E/N:

Hi guys! I know I have never replied any of your comments, but I read every single one... (not sure 'bout our translator though, he's too busy gaming to read comments I suppose..) But yeah, thanks a lot for all the comments and encouragements c: it makes me happy that I decided to (and succeeded in) enslaving forcing request for our dear translator to translate this back then and to share it with everyone.

T/N:

I would like to add that I do read comments and they have made doing this a lot more rewarding than I initially imagined. I am currently thinking about using another platform for comments/discussions for better interactivity, leave a comment to tell me if that's something you guys would or would not like. Thank you for the support thus far.

Chapter 26

26: Seeing Heaven

Ning Ning's symptoms regressed considerably once she started treating everything as a movie.

She could even smile at Chen Guan Chao while his saliva was landing on her face.

"What's with you today?" Chen Guan Chao ruffled his hair as if he was going crazy, pacing up and down the stage before stopping in front of Ning Ning. He stared at her with bloodshot eyes. "Where did your acting skills disappear to?"

Ning Ning raised her hand to wipe the saliva off her face then smiled at him. "This is the true level of my acting skills."

Her acting skills came from Qu Ning'er, it came from an unforgettable hatred. It proved that what the Director said was right. She was an actress with a fatal flaw, she was unable to portray any other state of mind besides hatred, unable to portray any other character besides Qu Ning'er.

But Chen Guan Chao could not accept this reality, he shouted at her for the eighth time, "Again!"

Sounds of lament filled the surroundings, everyone had tired looks on their faces. Everyone looked at Ning Ning with rather unpleasant expressions. Under Chen Guan Chao's intense pressure, no one had had a sip of water since that morning. Anyone who was as frail as the Socialite had showed signs of stroke, everyone was at their limit—including Ning Ning.

She was wearing a blue one-piece costume, it was wrapped up tight against her like a set of armour. She was already drenched on the inside. Ning Ning suspected that she had left a trail of water on the places she had passed by.

There was a row of standing bronze mirrors in the corridor, Ning Ning walked past the mirrors very quickly. A silhouette was left in the mirrors, like a spirit had flashed by. Suddenly, a song could be heard beside her ear. She turned around to look and saw a young actor on the stage that was supposed to be empty. He had peach-coloured makeup, rolling up his sleeves while he sang.

This was quite an important scene in <<Phantom of the Theater>>. After each show ended, rookie actor Lu Yun He would sneak onto the stage to practise his singing. There was a part which he could not get right. He started crying after repeatedly singing it. At this moment, a female singing voice rang out beside him, the voice sang the part he was not getting right. Again and again, repeatedly, till he successfully finished singing the entire song.

Lu Yun He was delighted. He looked up at the other party and smiled. The Phantom who was overlooking him from the balcony also slowly cracked a smile.

Chen Guan Chao named this scene as <<Seeing Heaven>>.1

At the beginning, everything went smoothly; but at the end, when Ning Ning smiled at him from the balcony, he did not smile back at her. Instead, he shouted back, "I want a first love's smile, not a smile which looks like it comes from a corpse. Ahhhh!"

She was at her wit's end. Ning Ning recalled the memories of her first love, then let it influence the nerves on her face and smiled at him.

...The end result didn't look good. Everyone took a step back, revealing frightened expressions. The scene resembled 'I gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes back at me'.

"No!!!" Chen Guan Chao shouted crazily, "Do it again!!!"

At night, Ning Ning crawled into the coffin wearily. Someone nudged her from behind. She turned around to look, only to discover that it was Wen Yu. He handed the lunchbox in his hands over. Ning Ning opened it up to look then laughed, "I thought they would not even leave rice for me, but they actually give me side dishes."

She did not have good relations with the crew. Because she was weird and reclusive, she was always alone in the cellar. She felt that there was no need to explain anything to anyone because this was a movie, there was no need to maintain a normal social circle, so it was only right that she had become ostracised.

She poked her cold meal with her chopsticks. Ning Ning suddenly asked, "Have you eaten today?"

Wen Yu quickly nodded, he even took out his exercise book and handed it to her. There was a drawing of his dinner on it, the contents were exactly the same as hers.

A drawing done ahead of time...

Ning Ning did not call him out on it, she smiled and ate her meal. On the second day, while they were giving out the meals, she secretly followed Wen Yu. She saw that he collected two lunchboxes from the canteen staff, but he did not go back to the cellar immediately. He ran to a deserted place and opened up the two boxes.

One of them only had rice, the other had more or less the same contents as everyone else's.

Wen Yu grabbed his chopsticks and evenly distributed the meat and vegetables among the two boxes. Upon thinking, he put the only two pieces of meat into Ning Ning's lunchbox.

"You don't have to do this." Ning Ning's voice rang out from behind him.

Wen Yu looked like a kitten with its fur standing on its end when he got shocked. He quickly turned around and saw that it was Ning Ning, and cracked a shy smile of someone who had been caught red-handed.

"I don't like to eat." Ning Ning said blandly, "Rice, meat or vegetables makes no difference to me. You don't have to give your portion of meat and vegetables to me."

Wen Yu bit his lip and looked at her. Suddenly, he took out the exercise book he always had on him and scribbled a few sentences, then turned the book around for Ning Ning. It read, 'I like to eat rice, I want to exchange my meat and vegetables for your rice.'

Upon reading this, Ning Ning's heart felt an unexplainable wave of agitation, her expression grew colder, "We're not exchanging!"

She left him there and walked away. She didn't let him help her collect her meal on the following day and did it herself. She opened her lunchbox in front of the canteen staff and everyone else. The canteen staff did this in private and could not straight up admit it, her face twitched as she let Ning Ning exchange it for another box.

To Ning Ning, a freshly cooked meal was no different from freshly baked glass slugs. Her face also twitched. The canteen staff in front of her shoved the box at her. "Take it!"

At that moment, Ning Ning's spider senses were tingling.....no, Ning Qu'er within her body was beginning to stir again. Just as she felt that a catfight was about to occur, a hand suddenly reached out from her side and accepted the lunchbox.

With his lunchbox in his left hand and Ning Ning's lunchbox in his

right hand, Wen Yu didn't have a hand to spare for his book, so he held a piece of paper with his mouth. A phrase was written with puerile handwriting: 'Thank you.'

The canteen staff read it and looked at his smile, she abruptly and gruffly said, "Put down the lunchbox! I will add another serving of meat and vegetables for you!"

Ning Ning was almost in a trance on the way back. She found out afterwards that within a span of a few days, Wen Yu had had way better relations with the crew as compared to her. It didn't matter that he could not speak, it didn't matter that his hands were too occupied to write, he could still blink both his big damp eyes, and look at you with a piece of paper in his mouth that said, "Thank you".

Thank you.

She never knew that these two words had such magic power, it could actually easily change a person's attitude towards you.

A few more days passed by, Ning Ning's standing within the crew fell again because Chen Guan Chao's patience seemed to be running out. He didn't want to torture Ning Ning or himself anymore, so he diverted his torture on Ning Yu Ren. Ning Ning did not know whether Chen Guan Chao had given up on her, or if he had finally discovered Mama's merit. She was sitting below the stage like an outsider now, admiring their performances. As she watched, tears started to flow uncontrollably.

"She acts way better than you do," The Socialite said from beside her, "at least when she says 'I love you', it doesn't look like she is a female ghost demanding for your life."

"Yup." Ning Ning smiled, "She is much better than me, she will forever be better than me."

It was almost time for her to accept her fate. Not everyone could become as great an actor as Mama. A lot of people could only act as one type of character in their lives, this type of people are called specialised actors. Maybe she was one of those people?

She was not in a hurry, because the end of this movie was a year away. She had enough time to think about her future, but someone else was more anxious than her.

Consequently, for a few consecutive days, something strange had been happening to Ning Ning. Someone would always leave pieces of paper filled with words at her door, or along her usual route. She never picked them up. As a result, the other party thought that the

pieces of paper looked ugly. The next day, they were left at her door and along her route in the form of paper cranes...

"What are you trying to do?" Ning Ning thought. She glanced at the big tree beside her, there was a kitten hiding behind it. She hesitated for a while before she picked up a paper crane and opened it. With one look she uncontrollably let out a little chuckle.

Written on the paper were several different methods of acting with puerile handwriting. To be more precise, they were methods of how to act out experiencing first love. The notes were all over the place, nothing was in order and everything was written in speech form. It was like the author wrote down every answer from the questions he asked from lots and lots of people.

Even if Ning Ning was useless, she had still graduated from a professional acting school. In those few years, she had seen quite a number of these. If she was to take any book from those days, it would be a lot more tidy than what was on the paper, it would also be a lot more professional. She glanced over to the tree, put the piece of paper in her pocket, then left without picking up the rest of the paper cranes.

Wen Yu came out from behind the tree and frantically picked up the paper cranes from the floor. Halfway through, a shadow loomed above him. He looked up and saw Ning Ning standing in front of him, spinning the paper crane in her hand, she asked him coldly, "What exactly do you want from me?"

She didn't believe that anyone would hate her for no reason, she also didn't believe that anyone would love her for no reason. Maybe she had loved before, but that feeling was dead now. Wen Yu's care and concern made her feel uncomfortable. Ning Ning stared at him, earnestly wanting to find out the reason he was doing this.

Wen Yu was evasive about it for a while, but after Ning Ning pressed him, he finally wrote down a sentence in his book. He passed it to her with both hands, his expression was filled with expectation and nervousness.

Ning Ning thought it would be some kind of difficult request, but written in the book was, "Cook a meal and eat it together with me."

"That's it?" Ning Ning looked up at him and dully said, "What's so difficult about this?"

Fifteen minutes later...

"Fire!!!" Ning Ning ran out as she shouted, the kitchen door

slammed open with a bang. Behind her, Wen Yu was holding the still shaking door while he grudgingly shook his head. He walked back into the kitchen and rolled up his sleeves. He washed a stalk of spring onion then put it on a chopping board and thinly sliced it. At this moment, the water was boiled. He brought over a tiny stool to the stove, stepped on it and opened the pot. The dumplings in the pot were cooked. He added the thinly sliced spring onion into the pot, layer upon layer like an emerald green flower.

He filled two bowls with the dumplings and returned to the cellar. He placed the two large bowls on the table, the aroma diffused into the air. He looked back, a wardrobe was shaking.

Wen Yu turned back and started blowing and blowing and blowing at one of the bowls till it cooled. He brought this bowl over to the wardrobe, squatted down and knocked on the wardrobe door. A trembling voice came from within, "...What do you want?"

He could not speak, thus he had no means to answer her. He squatted patiently beside the wardrobe until she opened the door herself. She looked at him fearfully and cautiously, like an injured dog who didn't even dare to ask for food from a person.

Wen Yu scooped a spoonful of dumpling soup and took a sip to indicate that it was not hot anymore, she could eat it now. He carefully passed the bowl over to her.

Ning Ning reluctantly took a bite to fulfill the promise of making a meal and eating it together, after which she refused to take a second bite. Avoiding the spoon he handed over, she gloomily said, "I don't eat anything that is warm."

Facing an adult who was picky, Wen Yu sighed like an adult. Like a Kindergarten teacher, he took a few sweets from his pocket. He thought that it was not enough so he also took out a collection of pictures and a few small glass beads, placed them at one side with a piece of paper that read, "I will give you one for every bite you take."

Ning Ning could not help but laugh at him pretending to be an adult. After laughing she suddenly buried her face in her palms and choked, "...Why me? On that day...why did you pick a person like me?"

She had never done anything for him, but from the first time they met at the family meeting to discuss his adoption after his mother passed away, he walked up in front of her and reached out his hands towards her. Was it because he was well acquainted with the owner of this body, Wen Xiao Ning?

The sound of scribbling stopped. Wen Yu flipped the exercise book over and revealed his answer to her, "Because you looked very sad, like you were about to cry."

Ning Ning was stunned.

"...What." She laughed for a long time till tears started streaming down. "So you don't actually need me, it's me who needs you....."

Ning Ning laughed and cried, she rubbed her tears carelessly and said, "I want to eat."

The spoon was passed over to her, Ning Ning sobbed and bit down on the spoon. At this moment she looked out from the dark wardrobe, the cellar was still very dark, but his smile had brightened up the whole world, and at that moment, a saying naturally appeared in her mind—

In this Hell, I've seen Heaven.

¹This is referring to the same scene they titled as Looking up to Heaven previously, the author had changed the phrase from, "仰望天堂" to 《看见天堂》, probably indicating a change from a working title to the final title judging from the punctuation used.

Chapter 27

27: The First Adopter

In the early morning, Ning Ning woke up alone while Ning Yu Ren and Wen Yu were still asleep .

"I really don't understand." She looked at Wen Yu who was sleeping beside her and thought, "Isn't it cold to hug me to sleep? This body is as cold as a corpse..."

Wen Yu looked like he was lacking a sense of security, or maybe he was afraid that she didn't have enough sense of security? He slept while hugging her like a koala, his arms were wrapping around her tightly while he was making chewing sounds twice.

Ning Ning carefully pulled her hand out. Her palm was a little numb so she stretched her fingers, she let out an exclamation. Was it because she had a warm meal yesterday? Her fingers actually had some warmth...

The door to the room was gently opened and closed without waking up anyone inside of it.

The courtyard had a layer of light fog. Ning Ning walked under the plum tree, she opened the hand-held mirror in her palm and said to the reflection, "Qu Ning'er."

Qu Ning'er appeared in the mirror.

Ning Ning was not afraid or angry like she was in the past, she even laughed and talked to her calmly, "You have been helping me all along. If it wasn't for you, I probably wouldn't have passed the audition for <<Ugly Girl>>, not to mention <<Phantom of the Theater>> afterwards."

Qu Ning'er also laughed.

"But you have been hindering me along the way. You don't allow me to love nor to act as other characters." Ning Ning's smile slowly faded, she told Qu Ning'er word by word in a serious manner, "I'm grateful towards you, but I'm sorry, I want to part ways with you now."

Qu Ning'er started to cry all of a sudden. As she did so she started shouting at Ning Ning angrily from inside the mirror.

But Ning Ning closed the mirror with a clack. Qu Ning'er's expression, her voice, all of them were enclosed within.

"Let's start anew." Ning Ning said to herself while letting out a deep breath, "I cannot achieve instant success and become an actress like Mama. Mama also started from flaring her nostrils. Let's take things one step at a time. Don't think about being able to become the Phantom. I want to do well in 'Seeing Heaven' first."

Starting anew is very difficult. It was especially difficult for Ning Ning. If she had started out at around the same level as Ning Yu Ren, then the others would be able to see her improvements. But her performance in the beginning was too eye-catching, so all everyone saw was how she had regressed since then.

Especially Chen Guan Chao. He now looked at Ning Ning with a face of a person who had been lied to, like a person who found a girlfriend only to find out that she was a man after she took off her makeup.

These mockery, pity, and resentment were all accepted readily by Ning Ning.

She was not required for the rehearsal, so she sat and observed from the audience seats. After the rehearsal was over, she called out, "Can you come with me for a bit?"

Ning Yu Ren stopped in her tracks, turned around and looked at Ning Ning.

They arrived at the corridor where Ning Ning first gave Ning Yu Ren guidance. Ning Ning modestly asked, "Can you teach me how to act in this scene?"

Ning Yu Ren was momentarily shocked, she looked down and tugged at her clothes. "Why are you asking me? Everyone said I acted poorly."

"You improve the fastest among everyone here." Ning Ning calmly said, "Do you remember? You didn't know how to act two months ago, now you are already able to decently act on the stage with another person."

No one had ever praised her so directly, Ning Yu Ren blushed slightly. After a while she looked up. "Look at me."

As she said that, she regulated her expression, then smiled happily at Ning Ning. The tip of her brows had a hint of an amorous and sophisticated feeling. Upon seeing the object of her admiration, she

showed her most seductive smile. This same expression, this same smile, Ning Ning had seen these on another person—Socialite Mu Rong.

"You should recognise it." Ning Yu Ren laughed. "I am imitating Mu Rong."

"Why her?" Ning Ning asked.

"Because she is Young Master Chen's girlfriend." Ning Yu Ren's answer was quite simple. "Young Master Chen is the male lead, he...he is a little weird. I don't know how I would like him, but Mu Rong is his girlfriend, she definitely likes him, so I cannot go wrong imitating her."

After a short pause, a wave of embarrassment flushed across Ning Yu Ren's face. She said in a low voice, "I know this kind of imitation is very clumsy, but I, I really cannot be like you. To sleep in a coffin, eat cold meals, not interact with people, and close yourself off in the cellar everyday for the sake of being close to a character... If I think about it, I came from my hometown to participate in this movie. Maybe all I wanted was to stand out among my peers, but I absolutely was not prepared to bear the hardships. Do...do you look down on me?"

"Why would I?" Ning Ning walked over and gave her a hug. Ning Ning gently told her, "You chose a very tough road, I only want to root for you."

Ning Ning could not take Ning Yu Ren's path, likewise Ning Yu Ren could not take Ning Ning's path. Ning Ning was not innately good at imitating another person, or you could say that she could do so, but she could not do it as accurately as Ning Yu Ren.

"No, maybe I can do it—exchange it with a method I am good at." Ning Ning slowly took out a few paper cranes as she thought.

Wen Yu took down all the narrations of methods of acting from his questioning, but the child could not differentiate the cast from the crew. So, out of the people he had asked, only a portion of them were actors, the others include: the chef, the drama teacher, the prop master etc...

She had originally thought that the cranes would be useless, but now she tightly held on to the cranes in her hand and laughed. "I have figured out how to act in this film now."

But before that, she still needed to make arrangements for Wen Yu.

According to the Doorman's hint, Wen Yu's life spanned from 1980 to 1988. They were close to 1988. Furthermore, Ning Ning didn't know if the movie would end once they get past 1988. As a precaution, she wanted to look for a good family that would adopt Wen Yu before that day came.

Her few relatives did not seem like good people. Not only did Ning Ning have difficulties providing for herself, there was also a good chance she would leave at the end of the movie, so none of them were good candidates. Thankfully, Wen Yu had a good relationship with the cast. Ning Ning asked around and obtained an address from Cook Chen who indicated that their senior might be able to adopt Wen Yu.

"Let's go." Ning Ning arrived at the entrance of the theater, she reached her hand out to Wen Yu who was waiting there.

Wen Yu looked a little unhappy. He only walked over after a while, placing his tiny hand into hers.

"...Master Cao is the owner of a restaurant, you can eat whatever you want if you stay with him. Maybe the next time I see you, you would have gotten fat." Looking at how Wen Yu was in low spirits, Ning Ning immediately changed her tone. "You will only be there for a few days. If you don't think you can get along with him, I will fetch you back here."

Wen Yu forcefully smiled, he suddenly felt something behind him and turned around.

Behind him, a man stared at him with mouth agape.

It was the skinny man who refused to adopt Wen Yu at the family meeting. The way he looked at Wen Yu was as if Wen Yu was a monster, or a dried corpse that had crawled out of a coffin; his face uncontrollably turned pale and he started to sweat. After a few moments, he hesitantly called out, "Wen, Wen Yu?"

Wen Yu abruptly turned back and ran.

"Where are you going?" Ning Ning chased after Wen Yu and followed him onto a bus. The ticketer stopped her and told her to get a ticket. She had no choice but to look down and open her purse, taking out the money she had borrowed from Ning Yu Ren which was supposed to be for a gift for Master Cao and used it for two bus tickets.

She didn't realise that as she was looking down and buying the tickets, a man was chasing the bus like a mad man, shouting Wen Yu's and her names in the process.

Wen Yu saw it, but he turned around and pretended not to see.

When the bus arrived at the bus stop, Ning Ning led Wen Yu off the bus. In front was a small and dirty restaurant. An overweight man was sitting at the entrance, removing feathers from a duck with his mouth. He looked up at them. "You guys are..."

"We are here because of Master Xiao Liu's¹ introduction." Ning Ning said as she pushed Wen Yu forward.

The overweight man was happy to see such a clean and pretty child. "I have waited for so long. Come in, come in!" He said with a duck in hand.

Master Cao had a wife, but she was poor in health and could not give him a child in ten odd years. Now that she was getting on in her years, they decided to adopt a child after some discussions. They preferred a boy so he could take over the restaurant in the future. At first, Master Cao was very passionate towards the two of them, he personally prepared a few expensive dishes, he also continuously put meat and vegetables on Wen Yu's bowl. But once Wen Yu took out a paper with 'Thank You' for him to read, Master Cao furrowed his brow, "What's this? He's a mute?"

"He is not a natural born mute. He received some trauma due to his mother's death." Ning Ning frantically explained.

"Then when will he recover?" Master Cao asked.

There were no concrete answers for this, Ning Ning also did not dare to give him false promises. Maybe he wanted to show respect to the person who gave the recommendation, Master Cao suddenly drank a few mouthfuls of wine and sighed, "Forget it. A chef needs his hands and brains, not his mouth. He can stay here for a few days, we will wait for my wife to return from the hospital to see if the two of them can get along."

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief. It was easy to find a family that could provide for Wen Yu, but it would not be easy to find a family that would not discriminate against a mute. From the looks of it, Master Cao seemed to be able to accept it for now, all that was left was for his wife to accept it. Ning Ning turned around and touched Wen Yu's head and told him gently, "Get along well with Master Cao, I will come back to look for you after a few days."

Wen Yu looked up and looked at her silently with his pitch black eyes.

In the evening, just as Ning Ning arrived at the theater, the person

who introduced Master Cao to her ran over frantically. "Wen Xiao Ning, it's a disaster!"

Ning Ning stared blankly, "What's wrong?"

"My senior's shop assistant just called, he said that my senior's house was on fire!" The other party said with horror, "It's burnt, everything's burnt down!"

Ning Ning was startled, she rushed out of the theater entrance in a crazed manner and ran to Master Cao's house without stopping.

Just like what the person said, everything was burnt down.

The restaurant which was bustling with people and was filled with food smell in the morning was now in ruins. Neighbours and firefighters were putting out the last bit of fire. Ning Ning rushed toward them and asked one of them, "What happened to the people inside?"

"Sigh, they burned to death." The other party seemed to be the neighbour, he shook his head and said, "I told Old Cao long ago, drink less when you cook, but he never listens. He must have been drinking again this time, then fell into the wok (because of it)."

Ning Ning loosened her grip on him. As she was about to rush into the rubble, someone beside her pulled her back.

"Let go! Let go of me!" Ning Ning struggled with all her might, until a small hand tugged the corner of her clothes. She looked down, tears suddenly filled her eyes, she squatted down and hugged him.

With only his face blackened, Wen Yu, who seemed to be fine, hugged her back.

"Are you alright?" Ning Ning choked.

Wen Yu nodded and patted her back as if to console her. His chin was pressing down on her shoulder, his eyes were looking at the direction of the restaurant, the remaining embers were reflected in his pitch black pupils.

Chapter 28

28: The Second Adopter

After taking into consideration how the heavy drinking of the first adopter had caused fire and thus him burning to his death, Ning Ning selected very carefully this time around. She picked a language teacher. The teacher was fat, her face would scrunch up when she smiled, making her look very affable.

"I am fifty this year, I don't really have any bad habits, I would fish by the river at most." She introduced herself to the two of them, "I was never married, I never had a child either. As I am getting older, I want to raise a child to take care of me in my old age and send me off. Ah, do you like to read graphic novels?"

Wen Yu stopped in front of a bookshelf and looked up at her.

The Language Teacher smiled and took down the whole set of < <Investiture of the Gods> > and gave it to Wen Yu "Go read them in the living room, it has better lighting."

Wen Yu looked at Ning Ning again. Ning Ning nodded at him, he went to the living room hugging the novels. The Language Teacher closed the room door and said to Ning Ning, "Let's talk about him."

They did not know that Wen Yu did not go to the living room to read. Wen Yu stood outside of the room they were in, leaning on the wall to listen to their conversation.

Ning Ning pointed out a lot of good points about Wen Yu in the beginning, the Language Teacher only listened before she finally asked while laughing, "You like him so much, why not raise him yourself?"

"He is a very good kid." Ning Ning said after being silent for a while, "But I am not a very good adult. I do not have a permanent residence or a stable job. No savings, no ability to pay for his school fees, I also frequently...lose my temper. Rather than me, he should have a better person (to care for him)."

Wen Yu blinked, then suddenly walked towards the living room. He opened a novel and sat on the floor. Not long later, the sound of footsteps came from behind him. Ning Ning put her hand on his head. He looked up, placed his face in her palm longingly, and looked at her with the gentle eyes of a puppy.

"From today onwards, you will live with Teacher Yu." Ning Ning also looked at him gently, "You have to listen to her, do you understand?"

Wen Yu nodded meekly, then reached out and hugged her neck.

It was to the extent that even on the way back, the heat he passed over still lingered on Ning Ning's neck.

"You have to get better, better and better." Ning Ning touched her neck and said softly, "I also need to get better, better and better."

Back at the theater, it was already meal time. Ning Ning took the lunch box from the canteen staff. She just turned her head, but then turned back to the staff again and smiled with unfamiliarity, "Thank you."

The canteen staff was surprised, she touched the back of her head and said, "Oh, oh, you're welcome."

Ning Ning did not bring her lunch box back to the cellar. She sat on a chair at the side with her lunch box, the people at the same table immediately stopped chatting and gave her weird looks. Ning Ning opened the lunch box, she froze for a bit when she saw the piping hot meal. She resolutely picked up a pair of chopsticks and shoved the food into her mouth with determination while trembling at the same time.

The Socialite exclaimed with a smile, "My Lady Phantom, why do you have the time to eat with us today?"

"I am only a phantom on stage." Ning Ning replied with a smile, "Right now, I am a human."

I am a human! I want to have warm meals, I want to interact with people, I want to say thanks. I cannot lock myself in the cellar forever, I cannot lock myself in a coffin from the past!

After the meal, she returned to the cellar and took out the paper cranes Wen Yu left for her. She read them one by one very carefully. Ning Yu Ren tossed and turned but could not fall asleep, she got up and asked Ning Ning, "It's so late, you're not sleeping yet?"

"I still want to study for a while more." Ning Ning said with her back facing Ning Yu Ren.

"What are you studying?" Ning Yu Ren asked curiously.

"'First Love'." Ning Ning answered.

"You found a method?" Ning Yu Ren could not help herself and sat

up. She followed Ning Ning's view and looked at the papers in her hands. After reading the contents of the papers, Ning Yu Ren furrowed her brows, "Are...these useful for acting?"

"They are." Ning Ning sat on a chair, raised her head and smiled at Ning Yu Ren. "Are you free? I can act it out for you."

The second day, in the kitchen.

Cook Chen looked at them strangely, "Do you two have some business with me?"

Ning Ning held up a paper crane and said, "Wen Yu gave me this. He said that you told him that first love is like an egg roll."

Cook Chen scratched his face, slightly embarrassed. "That...I answered randomly."

"Why egg roll? Why not things like rice dumpling or toffee apple?" Ning Ning looked at him sincerely. "There must be a reason, can you tell me? This is really really really important to me."

Cook Chen simply could not bend nor break her, so he could only reply, "When I was young, I made egg rolls for my first love for three years."

"Then she got together with you?" Ning Ning asked.

"No, she married someone else. I never made egg rolls from then onwards."

Ning Ning lowered her head in silence. After a few moments she suddenly raised her head, "May I ask, when was the last time you made egg rolls?"

"... It was at her wedding banquet. It just so happened that she hired my master as the chef. As a disciple it was a given that I would follow him to the banquet."

"I understand now." Ning Ning looked at the direction of where the eggs were stored in the kitchen, "I will make an egg roll, can you help me taste it?"

"I have no say in this." Cook Chen snorted. As of now he was only a helper, acting as a supporting role in the kitchen.

"Just watch me once." Ning Ning rolled up her sleeves and walked towards the chopping board.

She held nothing and put it on the chopping board, her other hand looked like it held a kitchen knife, she started to cut at a high speed

on the chopping board. Ning Yu Ren watched a while and realised that Ning Ning was chopping spring onions. Ning Ning's movement was fast and messy, as such she quickly cut her finger.

She stopped chopping (the spring onions) and put her finger in her mouth. She looked towards the entrance with an expression that looked like happiness and sadness. Suddenly, she rushed over to the entrance but stopped when she got there, Ning Ning came back to the kitchen dejected.

She started chopping again. Chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop... Eh? Ning Yu Ren touched her ears, was that the sound of chopping? As it turned out, she started hearing things after watching Ning Ning for a period of time.

Upon closer inspection, the way Ning Ning was standing was not her usual posture. Her back was a little crooked, her toes were pointing outwards. Ning Yu Ren turned around and looked at Cook Chen beside her—the two of them had the same standing posture.

Chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop... She finally finished chopping the spring onions. Next, she cracked the eggs, added starch and put them in the pan. She didn't use any real ingredients, so the pan was always empty. But when it was time for the dish to be served, it was like Ning Ning was really surrounded by an aroma. She slowly used the imaginary spatula in her hand to scoop the egg roll and placed it on the chopping block. Chop, chop, chop. Three cuts were made in total, the cylindrical egg roll was cut into four smaller pieces, then divided into two plates.

She was imitating how Cook Chen cooked? Watching up to this point, Ning Yu Ren had some doubts. What had this got to do with learning how to act out your first love?

It was at this moment, Ning Ning suddenly turned her head. She watched her surroundings warily, then slowly took out something from her pocket.

Her movements in taking this object out were very slow, the change in her expression was similarly really slow. It was to the extent that Ning Yu Ren could clearly discern the change within Ning Ning's heart through her expression—she had brought something bad into the kitchen, she didn't want anyone to see it. She was very hesitant now, considering whether to commit the next step.

Her movements were very slow when she was (feeling) hesitant, but once she made a decision her movements turned very fast.

Ning Ning quickly took out the item from her pocket. It was a bottle. She opened the bottle and sprinkled the contents on one of the plates of egg rolls. Ning Yu Ren gasped, but in the corner of her eyes she realised that Cook Chen was already stiff from head to toe.

Finally, Ning Ning turned around. In her left hand was a fresh-out-of-pan egg roll, in her right hand was the egg roll which was spiked. She brought both to Cook Chen.

"Do you want to let her eat the first egg roll," she asked, "or the other one?"

Cook Chen gulped and said, "The first egg roll of course...She is still alive."

Then the theme of this first love, would be 'giving up and forgiveness'.

The two of them walked out of the kitchen. Ning Yu Ren walked behind Ning Ning and suddenly asked, "You intend to act out everyone who was on the papers once?"

"Yes." Ning Ning answered, her hands were holding onto papers that were unfurled from the paper cranes.

"Why?" Ning Yu Ren shook her head, "You want to act as the Phantom, not the cook, the sweeper or the opera teacher on these papers. This is quite a waste of time."

"It's not a waste." Ning Ning looked back at her, "To me, if I want to act as a character, I need to understand their inner workings at that moment, then pick the actions the character would use and the things they would say. I cannot act as the Phantom because I could not understand how she feels inside... I could not understand how she feels when she falls in love with someone."

She looked down at the pile of papers in her hands, the bunch of people represented on the papers. "I don't have better ideas, I can only continuously act, continuously learn. Once I am done acting out everyone who was on the papers, experience all the first loves, maybe I will be able to grasp something."

And at the same time (she could) break away from the influence Qu Ning'er had on her. After all, she was the one who acted, not Qu Ning'er. She could not be controlled by a hallucination from the past all the time.

Therefore, a difficult session of self-training began. She could not use the training or rehearsal time, so she could only make use of her

rest time. But even if that was the case, not everyone was willing to go along with her. She had to temporarily give up on these people and looked for others who were willing to go along with her.

And thus, the first paper crane, the second paper crane, the third paper crane...As the number of paper cranes in Ning Ning's hands dwindled, Ning Ning's condition turned out for the better. Everything was on an upturn, the only thing that was disappointing was that deep into the night, there was one less person by her side. She always had an extra portion during meals, which she had to finish by herself.

Another morning.

"What do you want?" the Socialite looked at Ning Ning with vigilance and doubt, thinking that she was less normal today than usual.

"I heard that Chen Guan Chao is your first love." Ning Ning walked towards her step by step.

The Socialite grew more vigilant, "Of course!"

"What do you like about him?" Ning Ning imitated Chen Guan Chao, placing two fingers in front of her forehead, then waved them forward in an attempt to be dashing, "Like this?"

Then with the momentum from waving her fingers Ning Ning stretched out her arm and placed her palm on the tree behind the Socialite. Ning Ning smiled at her frivolously, one corner of her mouth curving upwards. "... Or is it like this?"

The Socialite had goosebumps all over her body, a violent shiver went through her. She bent down and escaped from under Ning Ning's arm then turned back and scolded her, "What's wrong with you today?"

"I'm just a little curious." Ning Ning said while laughing.

The Socialite rolled her eyes, then stomped her way over and said to Ning Ning in a low voice, "Stop trying to act innocent. Aren't our motives the same? It's for his money, money, money!"

Looking at the Socialite's back view, Ning Ning folded her arms behind her, smiled and shook her head. Not every first love was beautiful, sometimes they were full of lies and deceit. There were all kinds of facets in life, even if it was this kind of first love, it could also become tiny pieces which filled her heart.

But it was still lacking something.

"...You're not around." Ning Ning sighed and slowly turned around, "It always feels like something is missing."

Behind her, Wen Yu smiled at her. Like the sunlight shining through the canopy of a tree, coming down at an angle getting dispersed into tiny beams by the leaves, and ending up on her face.

Ning Ning only came to her senses when he hugged her waist. She returned his hug and asked while smiling uncontrollably, "Why are you back?"

Footsteps came from in front of her, she looked up and saw the Language Teacher struggling to speak in front of her.

"...Sorry." She stopped biting down on her lip and said to Ning Ning, "I cannot adopt him."

"...Why?" Ning Ning asked.

Wen Yu slowly turned back and looked at the Language Teacher while hugging Ning Ning. The Language Teacher avoided making eye contact with Wen Yu and frantically said, "It's nothing."

Ning Ning suddenly felt angry and walked towards her, "What exactly do you mean? He is not a pet you can return after a few days of buying him because you don't like him! What's the reason? There must be a reason right?"

The Language Teacher struggled with her words for a while before leaving Ning Ning with a sentence, "If you have the time, you can look at his drawings."

Ning Ning stared at her blankly.

Drawings? What drawings?

Wen Yu walked over from behind her and gently held her hand. Ning Ning bent over and touched his head. She consoled him, "It's alright. Even if she doesn't want you, I want you."

She felt that it was not good for a child to bear hatred, so she pulled his hand towards the direction the Language Teacher had left in and shook it, "Tell Teacher Yu goodbye and take care."

He stared at the direction the Language Teacher left in with his pitch black eyes. Wen Yu slowly waved his tiny hand, listening obediently to Ning Ning, mouthing the words, 'Goodbye, take care.'

...She really should have taken care of him herself...

A few days later, a fisherman found a floating corpse with a pale

face, its hair was scattered like seaweed. It was the person who had gone missing for a few days, the Language Teacher.

Chapter 29

29: The Third Adopter

Ning Ning took her time in picking a third adopter.

Once could be an accident, for it to have happened twice made her feel puzzled.

"Where are the drawings?" She remembered what the Language Teacher said before she left, Ning Ning bent down and held Wen Yu's shoulder while asking him, "Where are the drawings Teacher Yu talked about?"

Wen Yu looked up at her and slowly shook his head.

Ning Ning turned around. Wen Yu's book and pencil were on the table, she walked over briskly and flipped through the book. Most of it was filled with words, it was at the last page where she saw a drawing. It was a drawing of the two of them; they had a big house and a dog, they were holding hands under the sun, both of them were smiling.

Ning Ning looked back, Wen Yu was standing behind her. He was not angry at her for touching his things without permission, he only looked at her grievously and blinked once with his big black eyes.

Ning Ning opened her mouth, just as she was about to say something, *knock, knock, knock*, someone knocked on the cellar door. She looked over, a theater staff member stood at the doorway with a weird expression. "Someone is here, he says he's your relative."

The person was waiting for them at the hall. Ning Ning walked to the doorway with Wen Yu in hand. When she was still a distance away from the door to the hall, she heard an exaggerated voice coming from within.

"Wen Yu is a monster!" He said, "Wherever he goes, someone dies!"

A female voice cried out in surprise, there were also people laughing, "You are being paranoid!"

"Sigh, trust me, it's true." That person laughed. "When he was born, his father died in a car crash. His mother got addicted to gambling and lost everything they had, so she started borrowing money. She also killed herself not long ago, then you look at the two people who

adopted him..."

Ning Ning could not bear it anymore so she opened the door and walked in. "What nonsense are you talking about?"

There were a few people inside, Ning Ning looked at the person who just spoke. It was the Skinny Man, they had met each other at the family meeting. He looked towards Ning Ning then got up and said, "Little Sis, let me tell you a piece of bad news. Elder Sis is dead. Her entire family suffered from food poisoning a while back, all of them passed away not long after."

He looked at Wen Yu once he finished. "The only person who was not poisoned was him."

Wen Yu shrunk behind Ning Ning, his tiny hand was clutching the corner of her clothes, staring at the man with his pitch black eyes.

"He suddenly disappeared. Third brother and I looked for him for a few days to no avail, then I started working (nearby) and coincidentally met you guys on the way to work." The Skinny Man stared at Wen Yu, "I even called out to him a few times. He ignored me, I think he didn't want me to find you and tell you about all these."

Ning Ning looked down at Wen Yu, he was like a quiet kitten sticking closely to her.

"...I am doing this for your own good." The Skinny Man walked towards them with his eyes wholly fixed on Wen Yu. "Leave him to me, I will send him away."

Wen Yu suddenly let go of the corner of Ning Ning's clothes and turned tail to run.

"Wen Yu!" Ning Ning frantically chased after him.

Wen Yu was like a little deer being chased by a hunter, he ran madly from the hall back to the cellar, with a bang he shut himself in the wardrobe.

Ning Ning caught up and helplessly sighed, she slowed down and walked in front of the wardrobe then slowly squatted down. She knocked on the wardrobe door with her index finger, "Hi, Wen Yu, Little Wen Yu, I have something to tell you."

The door remained firmly shut, no sound came from within.

"I had already found a third adopter for you." Ning Ning laughed, "That person is me."

The sound of someone taking a breath came from within the

wardrobe.

"Will you dislike me?" Ning Ning asked from behind the door, "I am not a very nice adult, I don't have anywhere to live in, I don't have a stable job, I don't have money, I don't have anything, if I were to have any good points..."

An extremely gentle smile appeared on her face. This smile dissipated all the gloominess from her face. It unfurled her brows, as if she was basking in a layer of serene and gentle light; like the first glimmer of dawn shining through a glass window and sprinkling into a church, even her speaking voice was like a singing voice resonating in the church, "If you need me, I will always be by your side... I will never ever abandon you."

The wardrobe door opened. Wen Yu raised his head while sitting in the darkness. He looked at Ning Ning blankly, suddenly he started tearing up, he reached out his hand and jumped into her arms. His tender arms hugging her neck, tears streaming down his face silently.

Ning Ning hugged him back, giving him warmth, just like how he had given her warmth in the beginning.

Sound of footsteps rang out behind her, the Skinny Man got behind them step by step, he was panting a little.

"I will raise him from now on." Ning Ning turned back and said to him, "Please go back."

The Skinny Man was stunned. He looked at her from head to toe, as if he was listening to a joke. "You?"

"Yes, me." Ning Ning had made up her mind. If no one else in the world could accept Wen Yu, then she would accept him. She might waste a lot of time and energy in this movie, but she would not have any regrets.

The Skinny Man tried his best to persuade her. When he saw that he could not change her mind, he could only shout out that his good intentions were being treated as ill intentions. Before he left he turned back and shouted loudly at her, "Just you wait and see, you will definitely regret it!"

"I won't regret it." Ning Ning held Wen Yu's hand and turned back as she finished her sentence.

When they stepped back in from the front door and returned to the theater, what were awaiting them were peculiar looks and gossips.

Ning Ning found out for the first time that humans were fickle

beings. They would change their opinions of you because of the phrase 'thank you', they would also keep their distance from you because of the word 'monster'.

Wen Yu was not as welcomed as he was before. He did not complain nor held any grievances, he just grew increasingly unwilling to come out of the cellar. He would only smile when Ning Ning came back, running towards her like a puppy who had been left at home alone.

Ning Ning felt sorry for him. In order to not let him feel too lonely, she changed her original plan. She started to use all of her spare time to go back to the cellar and accompany him to draw or to tell him some stories. No matter what she did, he would look very happy, or you could say, as long as she was willing to come back and look after him, willing to accompany him, he would feel satisfied.

It was always going to be difficult to balance work and family.

Chen Guan Chao approached her to talk about it, he told her coldly, "You should send Wen Yu away."

"...You are a person who received education overseas, you actually believe in the 'monster' nonsense too?" Ning Ning asked with a frown.

"Of course I don't believe in it." Chen Guan Chao ridiculed the notion. "But you are wasting too much time on him!"

Ning Ning stared at him blankly.

"You didn't forget what you are here for right?" Chen Guan Chao narrowed his eyes at her, "You are here to act, not to be a nanny! If you had forgotten, you better remember now! If you could not remember, then leave the cast along with the child!"

These words from his mouth were heard by the ears of a person who cared. As Ning Ning left Chen Guan Chao's room, the Socialite peeked from a corner, the corners of her mouth curved upwards slightly.

It was peaceful for a few consecutive days. Beside the times when Chen Guan Chao fell into his mad shouting state, the Skinny Man would also come visit Ning Ning at times, persuading her to give up. Nothing else happened until tonight, the door to the cellar suddenly opened and a person slowly walked out.

It was Wen Yu, the moon shined on his cold and pale face.

He slowly surveyed his surroundings. When he determined that there was no one around, he walked out of the door towards the deep

part of the courtyard.

Behind a window, the Socialite looked at him with curiosity.

"What is he doing?" She was conflicted. "Should I follow him and check?"

She did not like Ning Ning. It didn't matter if it was as a woman or as an actress. As a woman, Ning Ning attracted too much attention from Chen Guan Chao. As an actress, Ning Ning was better than her in all aspects. She wished that she would benefit instead of Ning Ning when the movie was aired. She didn't like to help other people to succeed, she could only hope to get a grasp of Ning Ning's weakness so that Chen Guan Chao could act on his words and chase Ning Ning out of the cast.

Finally she decided to follow Wen Yu and check.

Wen Yu did not go too far, he walked to the side of the plum tree in the courtyard. It was going to be winter, but this tree seemed to be cursed, it wasn't flowering, it didn't even have much leaves on it. Someone suggested cutting it down and planting another type of tree in its place, but no one actually took any action. It was left alone, no one bothered with it, no one liked it.

Wen Yu picked up a stone and squatted down, he slowly dug the soil underneath the tree.

"What is he doing?" The Socialite could not help but think while hiding in a dark place.

Wen Yu dug silently for a while, until a hole appeared in the ground. He got up and patted his hands, lifted his clothes up and took out a book that was stuck to his stomach. He bent down and put it in the hole, then kicked the dirt on the ground until the soil filled up that hole, completely burying the book within.

Then he suddenly turned and looked in the direction the Socialite was in. Under the moonlight, his face was half shrouded in darkness and half in the light, a little of the moonlight was trembling in his pitch black eyes, like moonlight gleaming in the reflection on the clear and crystalline waters of a lake at night.

The Socialite hid behind a wall, covering her mouth with both her hands, afraid to speak. After a long while she peeked from behind the wall then let out a sigh of relief as he had already left.

She hesitated for a while, but eventually her curiosity got the better of her. She stole a glance at her surroundings. Seeing as there was no

one, she quietly walked to the tree and picked up the stone Wen Yu had thrown away. She dug the ground up and took the buried book out.

"Tsk, how dirty." The Socialite lifted up the book with two fingers. She trembled for a long while before she opened the book with a face full of disgust.

This book seemed to be what Wen Yu used to communicate with people on a daily basis, thus it had a lot of words. The Socialite read it for a while and discovered that these weren't interactions with Ning Ning, it was with other people...Hmm? Was it the daily interactions with his previous adopter? She suddenly felt that it was tasteless. She flipped it randomly for a while. Suddenly, she stopped flipping it and started to frantically flip it from the back to the front.

She had flipped to a drawing.

"...What is this?" The Socialite looked at the drawing with a strange expression, it even had a hint of horror. She was too engrossed in looking at the book that she did not realise a shadow had appeared behind her, it was silently approaching her.

By the time she noticed, he had already gotten directly behind her.

"...Who is it?" The Socialite turned around.

Chapter 30

30: Abandoned Child

Ning Ning usually woke up very early, but today she found out that someone was even earlier than her.

It was not only one person.

"What are all of you doing?" She asked when she saw that a crowd had gathered in the courtyard.

The crowd of people looked at her without saying anything with weird expressions.

Ning Ning locked eyes with them for a while then slowly turned her head. She realised that they were not looking at her, but at Wen Yu who was behind her.

Wen Yu ran over and hugged Ning Ning, then he looked down ahead of him, his vision going through the columns of legs, landing on the Socialite who was lying behind those legs, her face was covered with a red cloth? It was, in fact, not a red cloth, it was blood.

The doctor came, the police came, the reporters came. After a rowdy day passed by, the Director hammered the table and said, "We are about to start filming, why did such a thing happen!"

The Socialite died, the theater was sealed because of it. The cast and crew living in the theater were forced to move out, no one knew when they could move back in and restate it back into a filming location.

Chen Guan Chao looked awful. He leaned on the wall and lowered his head to smoke a cigarette. He suddenly looked up with a chilling expression. "This is not entirely a bad thing."

The Director stared at him blankly. "In what sense?"

"You connect this incident with <<Phantom of the Opera>>." Chen Guan Chao said blandly, "In <<Phantom of the Opera>>, the original lead female singer was almost smashed to death, it caused the appearance of the Phantom...isn't that the same situation as what we are facing now?"

The Director looked at him in an extremely unfamiliar way. He

finally said after a long time," ...She was your girlfriend, aren't you even a little sad that this happened to her?"

"Of course I'm sad." Chen Guan Chao said this, but his expression was very calm. "But what is most important now is <<Phantom of the Theater>>, my movie!"

Thus, during the period in which the theater was locked down, the popularity of <<Phantom of the Theater>> did not go down but actually went up instead. The newspapers continuously published news of the cast trying to hire a new supporting female role and of the bizarre murder at the same time. The major newspapers restrained themselves on what they published, the smaller newspapers on the other hand were fearless and wrote about anything and everything.

This news made Ning Ning who would be acting as the Phantom into a hot topic among people.

Especially when her poor relationship with the victim was dug out.

"A murderous actor? Interesting, let's watch the movie when it gets released." Was what a lot of people were saying and thinking, which was good for the movie, but what good did it do for Ning Ning?

People conformed to the majority's view, a lot of things that were not true became true as more people said it. Could it be that after the movie was done, she would have to live the rest of her life with the title of murderer?

"Why did you do this?" Ning Ning trapped the origin of the rumours on a wall, she viciously hit his face with a newspaper.

Chen Guan Chao's face was red from the beating but he was not angry. In fact, he turned around and smiled at her.

"You've changed." He said while smiling, "The child named Wen Yu has changed you. You no longer have spirituality, you conform to people, completely unlike the Phantom!"

Ning Ning was stunned, she suddenly understood and looked at him inconceivably, "You...hoped that I would hate you?"

"Of course." She had thought that she was thinking too much, in the end he actually answered seriously, "Not only do I hope that you would hate me, but also that you would hate Mu Rong, hate the Director, hate everyone here... like how you were back then. After all that is how the Phantom should be, am I wrong?"

"...Just for that?" Ning Ning felt that this person was unreasonable. "You did this just to make me return to sleeping in a coffin, eating

cold meals, taking cold showers?"

Chen Guan Chao suddenly reached out and touched her face. His expression was so gentle, it even had a trace of zealotry, but these gentleness and zealotry were not for her, they were for the other person in her body.

"I know you feel very troubled by what the Director said. You don't want to be a specialised actor, portraying a specific type of character all your life." He said in a soft voice, like he was soothing a lover, "But a lot of people had acted as countless types of characters in their lives yet in the end they would not even have a (single) memorable character. But you are different. You can let people remember you...Use your hatred, use your phantom!"

Ning Ning pushed Chen Guan Chao away with both hands, they took a couple of steps back at the same time.

"It's not like I have to act in this movie." Ning Ning said, "If you cross the line, we could just go our separate ways."

When she decided to stay in this movie, to take care of Wen Yu until he grew up safely, her choices had changed a lot. She could try her luck with another cast and crew, she could even look for a proper job, working from 9 to 5 everyday, making use of her free time to train herself, acting as the people around her, experiencing everyone's "first love".

"...You need money to raise a child right?" Chen Guan Chao shouted from behind her.

Ning Ning who was about to leave through the door stopped in her tracks.

"Not to mention that even if you leave now, the rumours outside will not stop." Chen Guan Chao told her, "Why not stay here? Stay here and finish the movie. I will give you enough money to raise a child."

Ning Ning slowly turned back. Chen Guan Chao was smiling behind her, a devilish smile borne by a person who was willing to sell his soul to the Devil for the sake of creating the movie he envisioned, for the sake of creating a character he had in mind.

"Don't waste your effort doing something you are not good at, acting as something you are not good at." Chen Guan Chao reached out a hand towards her with a complicated voice, as deceptive as his ancestor had been, "Devote your hate to my Phantom, to my movie."

Ning Ning looked at him with a complicated expression for a long time. She did not immediately agree or disagree, she only left him with a sentence, "Let me consider it for a while." Then she closed the door and left.

Chen Guan Chao tsk-ed in the room. He lowered his head and put a cigarette in his mouth. When he looked up, there was a person in front of him.

"Ah!" Chen Guan Chao was so scared by his sudden appearance he dropped his cigarette. "You scared me, why are you here?"

Wen Yu stood in front of him and looked at Chen Guan Chao from head to toe with his pitch black eyes. Wen Yu's fair and delicate right hand was holding a piece of paper that was folded in half, it seemed to be a drawing.

Chen Guan Chao looked at his hand, "You have something you want to show me?"

Chen Guan Chao reached out to take the piece of paper, but Wen Yu hid the drawing behind him. His tiny eyebrows furrowed, he hesitated before he finally softly shook his head, then quickly turned around and ran out of the room.

"Weird kid." Chen Guan Chao mumbled behind him, then locked the door to the room.

As the theater was still under lockdown, they were temporarily staying in a hotel beside it. Besides the cast and crew, there were also other hotel guests walking around. Wen Yu bumped into someone as he was turning a corner. He looked up at the person's face and immediately wanted to run away, but the other party held his shoulder and stopped him.

"Wen Yu." The Skinny Man looked at the drawing in Wen Yu's hand, then looked up at the direction where Chen Guan Chao was at. "Did you let him see the drawing?"

Wen Yu softly shook his head.

"Did you let Wen Xiao Ning see?" The Skinny Man asked.

Wen Yu also shook his head.

The Skinny Man started to smile. "Then do you want me to show it to her?"

Wen Yu froze, then slowly and staunchly shook his head.

"Good boy." The Skinny Man touched Wen Yu's head, then took the

drawing from Wen Yu's hand and put it into his own pocket. He firmly held Wen Yu's hand and said, "Come, follow me."

"Hold it!" A female voice rang out from behind them. Ning Ning ran over and seized Wen Yu. "I have been looking for you for so long, what are you doing here?"

Ning Ning looked at the Skinny Man as if he was a child trafficker. The Skinny Man looked at her stupidly, then looked down at Wen Yu, "Make your choice. Follow her or me."

Ning Ning looked in surprise as Wen Yu struggled to get free from her and ran towards the Skinny Man.

"Wen Yu." Ning Ning grabbed him. "Where are you going?"

Wen Yu looked back at her with a very pitiful look, his tiny fingers curled up like the paw of a small animal grasping on her sleeve. After grasping it for a while, he forcefully tossed it aside.

Wen Yu looked down and took a couple of steps back towards the Skinny Man, his hands fumbling about his body, a voice rang out behind him, "Here."

Wen Yu looked back, then slowly took the paper and pen from the Skinny Man. He scribbled a sentence on it and showed it to Ning Ning: 'You are too poor, I don't want you anymore.'

Ning Ning was a little stumped. She squatted in front of Wen Yu to see him eye to eye and seriously said, "I will work hard to earn money."

Wen Yu continued writing: 'You have no place to live in.'

"You can sleep in my arms." Ning Ning opened her arms. "I am your bed and blanket."

Wen Yu's hands trembled very fiercely, his words were getting more and more illegible: 'Your temper is absolutely terrible! I hate you!'

"I will change." Ning Ning smiled at him gently. "I will become a very good person for your sake, I will become a person you like."

Wen Yu stared at her blankly for a moment. He suddenly threw the pen and paper away and pushed Ning Ning with both hands. He continued to push and push, as if he wanted to push her out of his world, push her out of the place they were at then.

Ning Ning lost her focus and stumbled, she fell to the floor. Wen Yu turned around and ran towards the Skinny Man. He looked at Ning

Ning for one last time before leaving out of the door while holding the Skinny Man's hand.

"Wen Yu! Wen Yu!" Ning Ning shouted a few times from behind him. Wen Yu did not stop. Ning Ning was dumbstruck for a while. Following behind them, Cook Chen pulled her back after a few steps and told her in a low voice, "Isn't this good? Let the little monster leave, everyone is afraid of him."

Ning Ning struggled free and continued to walk forward. Someone pulled her back again after she had taken a few steps, she looked back and asked with a weird expression, "Ning Yu Ren, I cannot convince anyone else, but the three of us stay in the same room, shouldn't you know very well what kind of person he is?"

Ning Yu Ren fell silent for a while before raising her head and said, "It's because the three of us live in the same room that I'm telling you...just let him go."

Ning Ning was stunned. "What do you mean?"

"That night...the night before that tragedy befell Mu Rong, I saw Wen Yu went out." Ning Yu Ren told her in an extremely soft whisper, "He definitely did not go to the toilet, because he was away for too long. I have not told anyone else about this, I was afraid that it might bring trouble to both of you, but...Cook Chen is right. Let him go. Everyone is afraid of him, I am also afraid of him."

Upon saying that she suddenly stared at Ning Ning, "How about you? Aren't you even a little afraid?"

"Why would I be afraid of him?" Ning Ning laughed bitterly, "Looking at him reminds me of myself."

The pain of getting wrapped up in rumours, the pain of being discriminated against by people, the pain of being unable to share his troubles, the pain of self-loathing, the pain of almost becoming a real monster...she understood them.

So she got free of Ning Yu Ren's grasp once again and walked towards the two people. She shouted en Yu's name in the beginning, but she eventually stopped, following behind them quietly like an old dog that had been abandoned by its little master but could not bear to leave him.

Winter had long come. Snow had continuously been falling, covering the streets in a layer of white. There were few people on the streets. As they walked, the street was eventually left with the Skinny Man, Wen Yu and Ning Ning. The three of them made crunching

sounds as they walked on the snow-covered ground.

A cold wind blew, Ning Ning suddenly covered her mouth and coughed violently.

In front of her, Wen Yu's footsteps came to a momentary pause, before he continued to walk.

"I don't believe what they say." Ning Ning shouted from behind them, "You are not a monster!"

Wen Yu's footsteps slowed down slightly.

"So you don't have to worry, nor be sad." Ning Ning continued, "No matter how the world changes, at least I will stand by your side."

After that delay, Wen Yu suddenly picked up the pace in an attempt to lose her, tossing Ning Ning's voice far behind.

"Wen Yu! Little Wen Yu! Wen Yu little baby!" As she changed the way she addressed him, her voice became more humble, at the end she was almost begging him, "Come home with me!"

Wen Yu's back view was indifferent, but if you looked from the front, you would have realised that he was bawling his eyes out.

Ning Ning was also crying. While she was crying, a piece of paper fell from the Skinny Man's pocket. It twirled in the wind, and slapped her in the face with a loud smack.

That was a good slap. She thought, the world was always like this, just when she thought she had finally gained something, it would give her a loud slap.

She cried in the snow, then turned around and stumbled towards the direction of the hotel. She had no napkins on her, so she used the piece of paper in her hand to wipe her tears. It wasn't enough so she opened the piece of paper with the intention of using the other side. "Eh?" Her eyes stared at the image, unmoving.

At this point, two people ran towards her. One of them was Chen Guan Chao, the other was Ning Yu Ren.

"Are you alright?" Chen Guan Chao ran over as fast as lightning, as if he had found a lost treasure. He looked at Ning Ning from head to toe a few times and breathed a sigh of relief after he confirmed that she was fine. "It's good that you're fine, that was too dangerous."

"What happened?" Ning Ning looked at him with doubt.

"The police have found a witness." Ning Yu Ren said. At the night of

the incident, there was a man who scaled the wall and snuck into the courtyard. As of now he is suspected to be the real murderer."

"The police sketch has been released, but it was only the back view. They asked if we had seen this person." Chen Guan Chao handed the piece of paper over, "Look at who the person is."

Ning Ning took the piece of paper from Chen Guan Chao. The drawing depicted a tall and skinny shadow climbing over the wall of the courtyard under the moonlight.

With one look, she quickly opened the other piece of paper in her hand. The paper with her tears and mucus on it had Wen Yu's drawing. There was an overweight man in a chef's outfit, his upper body was in a wok, his lower body was on the ground. Behind him stood a tall and skinny silhouette with both arms in a pushing motion.

When the two pieces of drawings were put together, when the two extremely similar silhouettes were put together, Ning Ning finally understood a lot of things.

She understood why the Language Teacher wanted her to look at the drawing.

She understood why the Language Teacher died after looking at the drawing.

She understood why the Skinny Man was so adamant in trying to take Wen Yu off her hands.

She understood why Wen Yu tried so hard to push her away.

The poster at the entrance of the theater appeared in her mind.

On the poster was a pitch black swamp, Wen Yu was standing in the middle of it. There were a lot of people around him, but all of them (just) watched as he sunk. He also did not ask for any help, silently and willingly letting himself sink.

An abandoned child—at the last moment, he could have asked for help, but in the end he gave up on himself for the sake of letting another person live.

"Wen Yu!" Ning Ning abruptly turned around. She faced the wind and snow, shedding tears, running towards the direction they two of them had left for..

Chapter 31

31: The Real Ghost

Tiny footprints were left on the snow.

"I didn't want to kill your mother." The Skinny Man breathed out a breath of white air. "Too bad she didn't return the money I loaned her. I even knelt down and begged her, but she laughed at me. I got dizzy with anger so I pushed her out of the building."

Upon finishing, he looked down at Wen Yu. "You saw all of that right?"

Wen Yu shook his head at him.

He did not see anything. When his mother fell from the building, his mind was blank, he did not notice if there was anyone else upstairs at all.

"We've already reached this stage. You don't have to lie to me anymore." The Skinny Man smiled neurotically. "If you had not grown suspicious, why would you give the packet of sweets to Elder Sis and not eat it yourself?"

Ever since Wen Yu saw how his mother died, he had not been able to speak, so he could not tell the Skinny Man. Although Eldest Aunt and her family treated him poorly, he was still grateful to them for adopting him. So when he picked up the finely packaged sweets, his first thought would be to share it. It was just that when the sweets ended up in the hands of Eldest Aunt, she was not willing to share them with him and only did so with her family.

In the end they were the only ones who were poisoned, not Wen Yu.

"I didn't want to kill Eldest Sis. The thought of killing their entire family did not cross my mind." The Skinny Man mumbled to himself by the side, "Did you know? From the day the news of their deaths reached me, I never had a good night's sleep again. If there was even a slight movement in the night, I would roll out of bed in fear that it was the police coming to arrest me..."

His days were tough, Wen Yu's days were even tougher.

People who knew about this incident started spreading it, his reputation

as a monster got around thoroughly, no one dared to adopt him anymore. The Skinny Man was the only one who was willing to adopt him, albeit reluctantly.

But Wen Yu didn't want to drag the Skinny Man down.

At that point of time, Wen Yu really thought that he was a monster. Tragedies would happen wherever he went, ill luck would befall anyone he loved. Thus he did not accept the kindness of the Skinny Man. He brought everything he owned and stowed away on a train. He intended to leave, to go wherever the train would bring him.

"You escaped!" The Skinny Man suddenly viciously hit Wen Yu's head. "You actually escaped at that time! Do you have any idea how scared I was then? What could I do? I could only abandon my job and my girlfriend, I could only run away like a homeless dog, I was afraid of getting reported by you!"

Wen Yu held his head without saying a word.

He was a homeless dog, how could he not be. The scenery outside the train's window was getting increasingly unfamiliar. Where was this train heading to? Where would he be alighting? Whom would he look for after he got off the train? A newspaper, a name, a promise, then appeared in his mind.

When he got off the train, he wrote the name 'Orchid Theater' on his book and asked for directions along the way. He finally arrived at the entrance of the theater. What was his purpose in looking for her? He had not actually thought of it at that point of time. He was even a little afraid, afraid that she would chase him off at the sight of him...

She emerged from the theater with a gloomy expression. She looked like she was floating in the air, as if she was a ghost under the sun.

"...You came at a bad time." Ning Ning smiled at him. "I just attempted a murder, I'm about to be arrested soon."

He was stunned. As she was brought away, he chased after them. Then he heard the argument between the Director and Chen Guan Chao, heard the Director criticising her as an actress with a fatal flaw, someone who completely didn't understand love.

"I once had it." A completely withered smile devoid of anger appeared on Ning Ning's face. "I had once loved..."

At that moment, Wen Yu almost started crying.

Because he was the same. He too once had it, he too once loved. Those who loved him, those whom he loved, all had left him.

"She is as pitiful as me." Wen Yu looked at her and told himself, "I have to help her."

"But it's alright. God was on my side. I never would have thought that I could actually see you on the streets." The Skinny Man sighed. "Before that, I was not sure of it, but seeing the way you ran at the sight of me, I knew...that you knew about everything I did."

...He ran away because he was afraid, but not of the Skinny Man. It was because the Skinny Man represented his past. Wen Yu knew however, even if he could speak, the Skinny Man would not listen to him. Because ever since the Skinny Man killed a person for the first time, he had fallen into a very scary vicious cycle—for the sake of covering up that first corpse, he started creating more corpses.

The first one to die was Master Cao. Although his words were a little unforgiving, he actually really liked Wen Yu. *Four dishes were not enough, so he went into the kitchen to make more. Wen Yu didn't want to sit alone, so he went over to help. Later he saw a figure enter the kitchen from afar, as he took a closer look, the figure had gotten behind Master Cao and pushed the already a little drunk Master Cao into the boiling hot wok.*

Fire started burning then, the person who killed Master Cao had set fire to the kitchen.

Wen Yu was very scared. He escaped and hid in a place where no one could find him. It was not until Ning Ning appeared outside the ruins that he dared to run over and hug her.

He wanted to tell her what had happened, but when he looked up at the people surrounding the ruins, there was a familiar figure not far from him. He hugged Ning Ning tightly for a while, too scared to do anything.

"I also didn't want to kill the chef initially, I only wanted to set the place on fire and burn you to death. But when I thought about it, what if he extinguished the fire, or what if he ran away with you, so I decided to kill him along with you." The Skinny Man's voice was rather helpless, it also had a hint of someone who was numb from killing too many people. "But you were lucky. You didn't die, you even drew what happened and showed it to the Language Teacher."

Wen Yu hadn't actually seen his face, he had only seen his back view. He felt that the back view was very familiar, but he couldn't be sure, so he worked hard to draw the person. He drew again and again, then he brought his best drawing and showed it to his then adopter.

The Language Teacher was so frightened that she dropped the oranges in

her hands. She looked at Wen Yu with a peculiar expression, "What is this?"

"It's the bad guy." Wen Yu wrote on the paper, "He was the one who pushed the person."

That night, the Language Teacher did not sleep a wink, she looked at the drawing with her table lamp. The next morning, she made a good meal for him, put the new pen and paper that she had bought for him into his bag and put the bag on him, then she held his hand and brought him out.

They were on the way back to Orchid Theater.

"This is too scary. I am too old for this, I don't want to get involved." The Language Teacher told him on the way back, "I placed the drawing in your bag. Take it with you, show it to whoever you think is trustworthy."

The most trustworthy person in the world was Ning Ning.

But how would he dare to show it to Ning Ning?

The Language Teacher died. It was said that she accidentally fell into the water and drowned, but he knew that things weren't that simple. Because the Skinny Man appeared. The Skinny Man was at the theater, like a spirit of the theater, loitering outside. As he told everyone he met that Wen Yu was a monster, he also asked Wen Yu in private, "Besides the Language Teacher, who else has seen this drawing?"

Wen Yu shook his head to indicate that he did not show it to anyone.

Not only that, for the sake of protecting everyone else in the theater, he started to coop himself up in the cellar, consciously minimised his interaction with people, lest the Skinny Man starts eyeing them. The person he needed to distance himself away from the most was Ning Ning! But he could not control himself. Whenever he saw her, he would jump into her bosom, seeking shelter, seeking warmth, seeking her love.

But he could not carry on like this.

Because the Socialite was also dead.

"I've killed so many people; your mother, eldest sister, that chef, the language teacher, I even killed an actress in the end. Hehe, looking at the newspaper, she was even a socialite with some reputation." The Skinny Man smiled neurotically again. "I am not made to be a murderer. Even after killing so many people, I still get scared so I did not dispose of the body properly. It attracted so many policemen...Can you blame me? It was not my fault, it was your mother's fault, it was all your fault..."

He brought Wen Yu up to the top of a building then flashed a knife at him. He pointed the knife at Wen Yu and said, "Go ahead and jump, just like your mother."

Wen Yu looked at the Skinny Man then turned around and walked over. He was very high up, the ground was very far away, when he looked down he felt dizzy, as if he was sinking into a swamp.

Wen Yu was not strong enough to look death in its eyes yet. His legs started to shiver uncontrollably after one look. He could not help but take a few steps back, he could not help but escape, but the Skinny Man blocked his way.

"What's wrong?" The Skinny Man asked, "Feeling regrets?"

Wen Yu looked at him, his tiny body would not stop shivering.

"I know, I understand, I am also feeling regretful. I should not have killed your mother. Why couldn't I...stop once I have started?" The Skinny Man said with trembling lips, "I'm sorry. I don't want to kill you. But I'm really scared, I'm scared that you will tell someone what happened."

The Skinny Man started crying, as he was crying he used the knife to force Wen Yu to the side of the building.

He was already stepping on the edge, Wen Yu looked at the ground and thought: *'Was this the last thing Mama saw as well? Or did she see me on the ground?'*

Then, Wen Yu saw her.

Ning Ning followed the footsteps in the snow and ran towards the building like a madman. The sky was too dark, the street lights were not bright enough to illuminate her face. There was only a voice ringing out from far away. The voice was already broken, it sounded hoarse, it sounded like it was crying, it sounded painful, "Wen Yu!"

Wen Yu's eyes brimmed over with tears.

Don't you want to act in a movie? Don't you want to act as the Phantom? Don't you want to sing? Your throat is going to be sore from shouting, what will you do? You are already an adult, why don't you know how to take care of yourself?

"Wen Xiao Ning?" The Skinny Man had also heard her voice, he looked down and was mildly shocked, "Why is she here?"

While the Skinny Man was not paying attention, Wen Yu quickly slipped away from him. Wen Yu didn't even manage to take a few

steps before his hair was pulled and viciously dragged back.

"Don't think about running away!" The Skinny Man's eyes were red, he dragged Wen Yu and walked step by step to the side of the building.

Wen Yu used every ounce of his strength to struggle like a fish that was hooked out of the water, but the edge of the roof was getting closer and closer.

Moonlight shone on his face. Wen Yu looked up. With pain, with unwillingness, with sorrow and despair he opened and closed his mouth. No sound came out of his throat, he could only cry in his heart, "I regret this, I don't want to die, at least...at least don't let me die in front of her. I don't want her to look at my corpse, I don't want her to be sad like me..."

Chapter 32

32: 1988

This world was preventing her from saving him.

In the snow, the footsteps were slowly fading, Ning Ning was running in this race against the (falling) snow.

Chen Guan Chao who was behind her was of no help, he even tried to stop her.

"That's enough, what can you do even if you get there?"

"You are an ordinary person, can you deal with a murderer?"

"Go back, call the police, let the police arrest him."

"Is that child that important? How long have you been taking care of him? Not even three months? In these three months, how much trouble has he caused you?"

"Just give up, there are no more footprints in front, we lost them."

The wind and snow blew passed, Ning Ning breathed out a puff of white air while standing in the snow.

This world was always like this. You gave it your all but you got nothing back. She was always like this. Her efforts were always futile, but she could not help but give it her all.

"I will definitely find you, I will definitely find you..." She walked around as if she was hypnotising herself, she suddenly raised her hand, the flashlight in her hand illuminated the middle wall of a building. Her eyes grew hot, her voice trembled, "I found it..."

On an almost completed residential building site, a horizontal banner was hung on the side. On the banner was written, 'Welcoming 1988, Embracing 1988, Celebrating 1988'.

At that moment, Wen Xiao Ning's voice seemed to ring out beside Ning Ning's ears. The roar of a dying old woman who had spent fifteen years waiting for a movie rang out, "1988! 1988!! 1988!!!"

Things were obviously very different, but the two of them were still able to reunite under the three 1988s. Ning Ning was a little confused for a while. Was she Ning Ning or Wen Xiao Ning? Did she change

anything in the plot of the movie? Had she only been following in Wen Xiao Ning's footsteps one after another then walked in a circle?

But she smiled very quickly .

"If there was anything that was real in this fake world, that would be his feelings towards me..." She muttered, "No, it would be my feelings towards him."

Then, she ran to the building without hesitation. She shouted his name as she ran, "Wen Yu!!"

This voice penetrated the snowy ground. It penetrated the night sky. It penetrated the movie screen.

Ning Ning did not know, but when she chose to run towards the three 1988s, staff members began to walk into the originally empty Life Theater. They stopped in front of the movie screen and looked up at the screen in their distinctive masks. They were looking at the figure on the screen who was running as if her life depended on it.

At the same time, at the entrance of the theater, the Doorman who had been quietly leaning on the wall suddenly opened his eyes.

He turned around and looked at the poster beside him.

The poster was violently shaking even though there was no wind. It was as if a huge power was tearing it apart, to the extent that the names on the poster were also shaking.

The original title of the film, < <Abandoned Child> >, was shaking incessantly like a rock. Underneath this rock was another film title, a four-word title started sprouting out like a plant which was fighting hard to break through the earth.

"Stop!" Ning Ning rushed to the rooftop, the Skinny Man opposite her turned his head around. She tried her best to smile, "Brother, what are you doing?"

The Skinny Man was staring at her from a distance with a dark and obscure expression.

Ning Ning was angry and she was filled with hatred, but she did not dare show it. She used all of her acting skills, showing a sincere expression with no ill-intent and smiled as she walked towards him. She reached out her hand towards Wen Yu as she chatted casually about family affairs, "Did this bear of a child make you angry?"

The Skinny Man raised his knife and coldly commanded, "Stay back!"

His outstretched arm paused in the air, it was shivering non-stop from his fingertips. Ning Ning suppressed her desire to run away in fear and tried very hard to maintain her smile. In the eyes of others it looked like she was humbly begging him, "Bro, don't be angry. He is but a mute, a burden. If you really dislike him, I can bring him back, so that he won't drag... Ah!"

Ning Ning screamed, she held her right hand as she took a few steps back. Blood slowly flowed out from between her fingers.

There was blood dripping from the knife, the Skinny Man held the handle while looking at her with an extremely numb expression. It was as if the person he just pricked was not his blood sister, it was but a stranger, a deadman, a scarecrow.

The family approach did not seem to work on this type of people. Ning Ning looked at him, her expression slowly turned ferocious. She shouted very loudly at him, releasing all the fear and anger within her, "Where are you going to run to after you kill him! I know what you look like! I know your name, your age, I know everything! I will tell the police everything!"

It was then that the Skinny Man reacted a little, his eyelids twitched. He shouted back with the same fear and anger, "I am your brother! You cannot do this to me!"

"Let him go!" Ning Ning shouted while pointing at Wen Yu, "Let him go! Then you are my brother!"

The Skinny Man looked at Wen Yu then at Ning Ning. He looked hesitant, as if she had managed to persuade him. After considering it for a while, he stared at her. "...If I let him go, will you keep my secret for me? Will you say that you didn't see me today."

"Yes! Yes!!" Ning Ning frantically answered. She would agree to any of his demands at this moment.

The Skinny Man nodded, he pulled Wen Yu and walked towards her.

Ning Ning's heart which was originally suspended sank, half of her attention fell on Wen Yu. *Hmm? What happened to Wen Yu? Why won't he stop crying, why is he shaking his head at me?*

Plop—

The knife pierced Ning Ning's stomach.

"...You thought I would believe your nonsense?" The Skinny Man's face was very close to hers. He held onto the handle of the knife and

pulled it out before stabbing her again forcefully, over and over again, until Ning Ning fell to the ground.

Wen Yu burst into tears silently. He broke free from the Skinny Man and threw himself on Ning Ning.

The Skinny Man took a couple of steps back. He raised his hand and wiped his face, he started to laugh in a carefree manner.

A man who wanted to kill his nephew just because he suspected his nephew had witnessed him killing someone and that this nephew might divulge his secret. A man who had killed strangers just because he suspected that these strangers would recognise him based on a drawing. How could such a man believe in Ning Ning's words?

"Sister, I didn't want this to happen." He looked down at Ning Ning who was in a pool of blood and mumbled, "You wanted to report me."

Then he tilted his head and looked at Wen Yu, "Now it's your turn."

Wen Yu was still not aware of his surroundings. He would not stop crying, he would not stop pushing Ning Ning's body, he didn't care about the Skinny Man behind him at all, he did not care about the knife in the Skinny Man's hand.

A scream rang out from beside them. The Skinny Man stopped in his tracks. He turned around and saw that Chen Guan Chao and Ning Yu Ren were standing at the stairway. Ning Yu Ren was so frightened by the situation that she buckled under her own weight and sat on the ground, Chen Guan Chao tried to help her up to no avail.

"Here comes two more." The Skinny Man's voice actually sounded sad. It was unknown whether he was sad for the two of them, or sad that he was turning into a serial killer.

"Save me, save me!" Ning Yu Ren grabbed onto Chen Guan Chao as she looked at the Skinny Man approaching them. She tried her best to help herself up by climbing up Chen Guan Chao's body like a dodder flower.²

Chen Guan Chao looked at the bloody knife in the Skinny Man's hand. His vision moved past the Skinny Man and onto Ning Ning who was lying on the ground in a pool of blood. She was bleeding so much and was not moving, she looked like she was dead.

"Wen Xiao Ning!'" He shouted defiantly. His eyes were filled with the pain of someone who was looking at a ruined precious artwork. He shouted at her a few times, but she did not react. The Skinny Man sneered at him, "Are you her boyfriend? You don't have to shout

anymore, she is already dead."

"She is already dead..." Chen Guan Chao murmured. He suddenly looked down at Ning Yu Ren who was sitting down beside his leg.

At the moment they crossed their eyes, Ning Yu Ren saw the look of retreat, apology and unconcern from Chen Guan Chao's eyes.

The persistence which had led him here was due to Ning Ning, or one could say it was for the Phantom, it was not for Ning Yu Ren.

"....I'm sorry." He suddenly pried Ning Yu Ren's hand apart, then quickly turned around and disappeared down the stairs.

Ning Yu Ren stared at his back view blankly. She lowered her head, covered her face and started crying.

"Shit!" The Skinny Man chased after Chen Guan Chao for a few steps before returning. He looked at Ning Yu Ren ferociously. "I'll deal with you first!"

Upon hearing this, Ning Ning who was in her own pool of blood, weakly opened her eyes.

Mama...

Ning Ning struggled to stand up, but she fell back down the moment she got up a little. Wen Yu looked at her from the side, then at Ning Yu Ren across from him. He suddenly ran over, opened his tiny arms and grabbed the Skinny Man's leg. Due to his fear, Wen Yu closed his eyes while he was grabbing the leg, trembling silently.

"What's this?" The Skinny Man looked down and grimly smiled. "You want to die first? Come, I will fulfill your wish."

Upon finishing this sentence, he grabbed Wen Yu's hair and dragged him towards the edge of the roof.

Wen Yu...

Ning Ning struggled to get up. The Skinny Man's silhouette was reflected in her pupils. This was the first time she had hated someone so much in her life. This hatred supported her as she stood up. She started to walk over, but it was not enough, it was still not enough...

"Ning'er...Qu Ning'er!!" She roared in her heart, "Come out! Help me! Come out! I'll hand this body over! Come out! Take it!"

...Damn it, she wouldn't appear even at such a crucial moment.

Then she could only rely on herself!!

She gritted her teeth and ran towards the Skinny Man. Upon hearing movement behind him, the Skinny Man turned around and collided with Ning Ning. She held onto his waist tightly and refused to let go.

"What are you trying to do?" The Skinny Man was knocked two steps back by Ning Ning. Once he saw that he was two steps closer to the edge of the roof he started to feel a lingering fear. He turned around and stabbed Ning Ning's back crazily, "Let go! Let go! Quickly let go!"

"...AHHHHH!!" Ning Ning held on firmly, she endured the immense pain, she shouted hoarsely, for the sake of—letting another person live on.

Upon hearing the shout, Chen Guan Chao who was already on the streets below the building looked back up.

He saw Ning Ning who was holding onto the Skinny Man fell across the sky like a glorious shooting star.

That image hit Chen Guan Chao hard. He stood unmoving on the spot for a very long time, before suddenly shouting, "I understand now, I understand now!"

Then he reached into all of his pockets. He found a pen but he did not have a book, thus he took out two drawings. On one side was the drawing of the Skinny Man committing a murder. He sat down by the road alone, flipped the paper around and put it on his thighs then started writing a new < <Phantom of the Theater> > superciliously.

Morning came.

The first rays of sunlight of 1988 broke through the clouds, illuminating the three 1988s on the horizontal banner and the face of Ning Ning who was on the verge of death.

A child's cry accompanied the break of dawn.

Wen Yu quickly ran downstairs and arrived at Ning Ning's side. He cried so much that his face was wrinkled. He opened his mouth and used a crying voice that sounded awkward and cried, "Aunt Xiao Ning."

Ning Ning had managed to save one final breath due to the Skinny Man hitting the ground first. She slowly turned her head over, "You have a wonderful voice."

It was just like the voice she heard for the first time at Life Theater, it was moving and ethereal, it was as pure as the flapping of pigeons

in a church.

"I'm sorry..." He reached out with his tiny hand and touched her bloody cheek. He choked, "If not for me..."

"...Before I met you, I have always been a ghost." Ning Ning smiled at him, "Because of you, I started to come alive, so I..."

Chapter 33

33: Phantom of the Theater

"What?" Chen Guan Chao ran over suddenly, his hair was in a mess, you could see that he had been scratching his head with one look. He was usually dressed smartly, the only reason for this to happen would be that—he was short on inspiration, or that he forgot his lines.

Without waiting for his answer, Ning Yu Ren suddenly rushed over from the side and pushed him down to the ground. He got up, she pushed him down again.

"What are you doing?" Chen Guan Chao shouted angrily at her from the ground.

"Could you stop caring about your movie at this time?" Ning Yu Ren's hair was all over the place, she opened her arms and stood in front of Ning Ning and Wen Yu.

"People will eventually die!" Chen Guan Chao raised the paper in his hand, he had the fanatical expression of a martyr. "Only the Phantom is eternal!"

Ning Yu Ren snatched the paper that was crammed with words from him and threw it on the ground, she stepped on it continuously with both feet. Chen Guan Chao shouted and jumped in to protect his script.

As the two of them were fighting, Wen Yu lowered his body and placed his ear near Ning Ning's lips.

Ning Ning slowly moved her lips and shouted in her heart, *'Quiet down, you two!! Let me finish my last words!!'*

Ning Ning's vision was turning dark. Wen Yu was right in front of her, but she was slowly losing the sight of his face, she frantically shouted...

"I have no regrets!"

The drink by her hand spilled onto the floor, the juice within flowed out and suffused at her feet.

Ning Ning stood from the audience seat and stared blankly at the giant movie screen in front of her.

"...Ah!" She slapped herself on the forehead, "Why did you not let me finish my sentence!"

Maybe she was hit too hard, a wave of dizziness suddenly came over her. The screen looked like it was moving, the floor felt like it was moving. Ning Ning swayed as she lost her footing, her butt went back onto the seat, then she bent over and vomited, "Urghhh."

The movie started playing, voices came from within the movie, but Ning Ning did not pay attention to what was being said. After she recovered from her dizziness, she started to lose her hearing, it sounded like countless bees were buzzing in her ears.

"What is going on?" Ning Ning covered the pit of her stomach, her heart was beating as if she had just finished a marathon, she felt scared. "I came back after dying last time as well, why does this time...feel so awful?"

She vomited again, then fell back limply on her seat, unable to move.

After around two hours, the gentle ending theme started playing like seawater crashing into her ears, she reopened her eyes and looked up.

On the screen, the credits had just finished rolling.

A few snow white words appeared in front of her.

< <Phantom of the Theater> > .

The End.

"Why is it *Phantom of the Theater*?" Ning Ning murmured as she looked at the words, "Wasn't it *Abandoned Child*?"

The movie had ended, but the theater did not turn its lights back on. Were the lights malfunctioning, or was it due to the theater not having enough customers that they are saving on expenses? Ning Ning continued to sit for a while, then slowly stood up while holding onto the arm rests. She stumbled towards the exit, suddenly she looked back. "...What are you guys doing?"

Clomp. The staff with the court lady mask stopped in her tracks and looked at Ning Ning silently.

Clomp, clomp, clomp. Countless staffs stopped in their tracks beside her and behind her, they looked at Ning Ning silently.

"...Is something wrong?" Ning Ning asked, but no one answered her. She was getting goosebumps from getting stared at. She could not help

but turn around and take a step, behind her the sound of footsteps rang out again. She turned back abruptly, "What do you guys want?"

As before, no one answered her. Those mask-wearing staffs silently stared at her for a short while, they suddenly took a step and walked towards her.

Ning Ning hurriedly turned around and ran towards the front door.

Clomp, clomp, clomp. Footsteps rang out behind her. They were getting closer, they were getting faster. Ning Ning turned around to take a look, but all she saw within the theater was darkness. The bodies of the staff members had disappeared as if they had melted into the darkness, becoming part of the theater, only the masks on their faces were trying their best to preserve their colours, their shapes.

Those masks, the smiling ladies, the crying old women, the pale-faced scholars, the monkeys and Ba Jie¹ were chasing after her one by one.

Ning Ning dared not look again, she was afraid that she would scream if she took another look.

There was no time to scream. Ning Ning ran towards the front door for her life. It was just a few steps away, but the wave of dizziness was back. The door started to move, the ground also started to move, her body swayed and she fell to the floor on her side. Just as she fell to the floor, countless numbers of hands reached out towards her from behind.

One hand grabbed her.

"Quickly get out!" The Doorman with his snow-white mask growled at her as he lifted her up from the floor.

Ning Ning finally came back to her senses after being dragged by the Doorman for a few steps. She hugged his solid arms with both her hands, like a drowning person who was hugging a piece of log, struggling to paddle towards the shore, towards the entrance.

The pathway was short, but it was also very long, on the way out she started dry-coughing non stop again.

"Hold on." The Doorman encouraged her gently. He suddenly reached out and pushed her back. "Go out!"

Ning Ning was pushed out of the door.

Behind her, the Doorman did not follow her out. He stopped in his tracks and turned back slowly, looking at the staff members that were

still relentlessly chasing. He slightly lowered his head. When he looked up again, a fiery flame pattern had appeared on his snow-white mask, even his eyes shined red with the blaze of fire.

"Get back!!!" He roared at them with a scary and murderous expression.

The staff members stopped in their tracks and looked at him from a distance, they didn't want to leave but they did not dare to walk up to him.

The sound of someone retching rang out, the flame pattern on his mask started receding a little as the Doorman turned around. He was wearing a snow-white mask again, looking at Ning Ning who was squatting by the door and vomiting a lot.

He reached out a hand hesitantly, only to retract it a couple of times, finally he carefully placed it on her back.

"...I told you not to get close to that Wen Yu." He gently patted her back and said helplessly, "Kindness never begets kindness, in the end you will be the one who gets hurt."

Ning Ning was stunned, she turned and looked at him. This sentence was so familiar, where did she hear it from?

"...Go home." The Doorman raised his hand. A taxi stopped in front of them. This time, he did not help her into the taxi, instead he guarded the entrance and told her sincerely, "Don't come back here again...This place, is not as good as you imagine it to be."

How could she go back just like this!

"What was going on with those people just now?" Ning Ning got back to her senses and asked him agitatedly, "Why were they chasing me?"

"They won't chase you if you don't come back." The Doorman said.

Ning Ning stared at him blankly and asked herself, would she come back?

Her conclusion was...yes. The first time she came here was because of Mama's last words. The second time, she came here so that she could act well as the Phantom. She didn't know what the reason would be for her to come here the next time.

Young people might not know, successful people might not understand either. Only talentless people like her who wanted to be a professional and people who were in their thirties or forties and yet to

succeed, would understand the need to brave the danger and to hold on, else what would they have to hold on to? Nothing at all. This was the only chance, the chance to change her fate.

An opportunity was still an opportunity even if it was a bad one.

"...What happens if I get caught?" Ning Ning asked.

The Doorman's tone changed and he sounded a little annoyed, "You intend to come back?"

He looked a little scary when angry, Ning Ning took a step back. The taxi driver behind her shouted, "Do you want to go or not?"

"Yes." Ning Ning turned back and shouted before looking at the Doorman with a complicated expression.

He stood at the entrance of the theater like a mountain. Countless people, countless masks stood behind him.

Ning Ning did not take notice of them in the beginning because they didn't speak, but looking at them now, she felt scared for a moment. Especially with how their heads move along with her footsteps, and how their masks were always facing her silently, staring at her.

"...I'll come to look for you next time." Ning Ning felt a little frightened, added with the fact that her body was giving out, she opened the taxi door and entered.

The car engine roared to life and drove off in a puff of smoke from the entrance as if it was getting chased.

The Doorman watched as the taxi left in the distance, his hair was a little messy from the wind, the poster beside him also rattled in the wind.

If Ning Ning had looked back at the poster now, she would have been surprised to find out that it had changed.

A big red curtain, an old-fashioned stage, two coffins were placed on the stage.

Two people walked out of each of the coffin, one on the left and the other on the right. On the left was Wen Yu, on the right was a woman wearing a stage costume, they were walking towards each other, hugging each other.

As they hugged, the woman's figure slowly disappeared from his embrace, like a spirit diffused in the sunlight.

Title: < <Phantom of the Theater> > .

Starring: Ning Ning, Wen Yu.

On the other side, Ning Ning had reached home.

The first thing she did when she got home was to rush to the toilet and to vomit non stop. When she was done, she had cleansed everything out from her stomach and her brain. She sat on the floor gasping for air for a while. Chills were running down her body, her stomach convulsed and made her shout in pain, "Wen Yu, help me fetch water for me to wash my face with..."

After a while, no one answered.

She struggled to get up and turned on the tap herself. She washed her face and feet using warm water with difficulty, then she drank a full glass of hot water before returning to the bedroom and wrapping herself tightly in her blanket. She lied on her side and mumbled to the air beside her, "I have to get better, you have to get better too, the both of us have to get better."

I would take good care of myself in the days without you, you would also have to take good care of yourself in the days without me, never ever give up on yourself.

These words, these meanings, these promises were meant for him...She should have told him earlier, just in case she lost her chance to do so.

It was to the extent that Ning Ning was hammering her pillow in her sleep while sleep talking, "Quiet down you two!! Let me finish my last words!!"

When she woke up on the following day, she had no time to continue to look at the information her manager had sent her, neither did she have the time to look at Director Chen's first version of < <Phantom of the Theater> > . Why would she look at a piece of work he was not satisfied with? On this day, Ning Ning ordered food delivery a few times, she continued to order one after another as the previous delivery was not enough to satisfy her hunger.

Scalding hot chicken soup went down her stomach, piping hot dishes went down her stomach. The warmth started slowly spreading from her stomach to her limbs, Ning Ning rested for the entire day comfortably. On the next day, she received a phone call from Director Chen.

"Do you have an answer now?" Director Chen asked in a direct

manner, "What is love?"

Ning Ning closed her eyes then answered after a while, "I don't know."

"Is that so..." Director Chen's voice sounded extremely disappointed.

"The answer is in my heart." Ning Ning said, "But as of now I...cannot find a suitable phrase to describe it."

After a short pause, she suddenly said, "But I can act it out for you."

There was only silence on the opposite end of the phone call for a moment.

"...It is 2pm now." Director Chen's voice resounded after a long while, "I will give you 3 hours of preparation time. I will wait for you at my house at 5pm, give me your answer with your acting skills!"

Chapter 34

34: Two Minutes of Acting

"Two minutes." Chen Shuang He told himself in the mirror with his hands on the sink, "Crush her!"

Back in the living room, his father's voice rang out.

"You look a little nervous." Director Chen was sitting on the sofa with a red wine bottle in hand, scarlet-red wine filled a wine glass which he handed over to Chen Shuang He, "Do you want a glass? It can help you calm down."

"...No need." Chen Shuang He looked towards Director Chen, his face had a trace of humiliation, "What happened last time will not happen again."

"Oh?" Director Chen retracted the wine glass and took a sip from it. "You are that confident?"

"Of course." Chen Shuang He said coldly, "After I carefully thought about it, what she showed at the <<Ugly Girl>> audition was not acting skills at all!"

It was impossible for someone's acting skills to improve tremendously in a short period of time. A genius could do it, but Chen Shuang He didn't consider Ning Ning as a genius, calling her mediocre was already praising her! So last time at the <<Ugly Girl>> audition, her eye-catching performance could only be explained by one thing...

"It was only a coincidence." Chen Shuang He said slowly, "Her mother passed away, unintentionally causing her character in real life and the script to overlap. And thus, she performed well as Qu Ling, because it did not require acting skills, she only had to act as herself."

"So?" Director Chen gazed at him.

"So, she may be able to perform well as Qu Ling, but not as the Phantom." Chen Shuang He said, "Because she has nothing in common with the Phantom, there is no way she would get by through a coincidence again..."

"Hold on..." Director Chen suddenly interrupted him, he sized up Chen Shuang He and asked, "Am I under the wrong impression? You

seem to be biased against her."

...You have no right to say that about me! Who was the one who was clamouring for her to leave the entertainment industry a week ago?

"...I don't." The corners of Chen Shuang He's mouth twitched. "I was only speaking the truth."

As he said that, the doorbell rang.

"...Then prove it." Director Chen put down the wine glass, rolled up his sleeve and looked at his wristwatch. He looked up at Chen Shuang He and blinked. "Two minutes, crush her."

...He actually eavesdropped on his own son talking to himself in the toilet, this person was too disgusting!

Chen Shuang He walked angrily to the front door.

Chen Shuang He opened the door. Ning Ning stood outside of the door looking as frail as last time, but she seemed vaguely different. Chen Shuang He did not get to the bottom of what exactly was different, because it didn't matter, because she would only be in his life for two more minutes at most.

"Did you watch <<Phantom of the Theater>>?" He asked directly.

"I did." Ning Ning answered.

Two minutes of acting had begun.

Time was limited, which scene should he pick? Which scene would better express her ineptness and inferiority?

Chen Shuang He quickly arrived at an answer in his heart.

"That's great." He smiled faintly, "Let us act scene fifteen of <<Phantom of the Theater>>— Seeing Heaven."

There was a minute thirty left.

The two of them went to the living room, Chen Shuang He drew the curtains as they passed by the French window, the thin sunshine was completely cut off from the outside and the living room turned dim.

He stood within the darkness and closed his eyes. Once he opened them again, he had already become an innocent and timid rookie actor.

His hands held a formless broom as he slowly swept the floor, he looked around all of a sudden and realised that there was no one else

on the stage. He happily smiled and put the broom aside, then coughed twice and held onto an orchid, imitating the star performer and started singing on stage.

"Orioles dream-waking coil their song," he sang, "through all the brilliant riot of the new season."

As he sang, Chen Shuang He looked out for Ning Ning's movements. That was weird, why was she not making any moves? Was she still watching from the sides?

At this point, he noticed what Director Chen was looking at.

Director Chen's eyes were moving, his sight moved from Chen Shuang He to the direction of the stairs. Chen Shuang He understood, Ning Ning had just silently walked past him from behind like a fleeting shadow, but he had not noticed it at all.

As his mind wandered, he sang off-key.

As he was about to continue singing, a voice slowly rang out from upstairs, "I am the partner born of fairest line, for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past."

It was exactly the line he had just sung.

Correcting the exact part where he was off-key.

Chen Shuang He was mildly stunned, then he laughed coldly in his heart. *You dare to teach me how to sing as if you were the true Phantom even when you have never received any singing training?*

For the sake of this movie, he had especially hired a singing teacher and trained hard for three days!

There was a minute left.

"Everywhere I have searched in compassion for you, secluded in your chamber."

"There, just beyond this railing, peony lined against the mound of weather Tai-hu rocks."

"Somewhere at some past time you and I met. Now we behold each other in solemn awe but do not say in this lovely place we should and speak no word."¹

...How could this be!

As Chen Shuang He sang, he became more and more fearful, more and more disheartened. He was definitely not a professional singer, but she should not be able to sing so professionally! He had only

learned how to sing for three days. His teacher praised him saying that he was gifted, that if he wasn't an actor, he could go into the opera business, but what was going on with her?

She followed up every line he sang.

It was fine if she was worse or at around the same level as he was, but the problem was that...she was better than him on every line, more professional than he was. The difference was so big that it was like she was the real Phantom, correcting his singing line by line, teaching him how to sing line by line.

Chen Shuang He turned his head abruptly and shouted towards the direction of the spiral staircase, "Who's there!"

There were ten seconds left.

Chen Shuang He rushed up the stairs as he finished shouting.

This was not something from <<Seeing Heaven>> at all, thus Ning Ning was taken aback for a moment before she turned and ran. Chen Shuang He caught up to her, he opened his arms and finally seized her by the waist.

"I caught you." He placed his chin on her temple and panted.

"... " She fell silent in his arms, then quietly asked, "...Aren't you afraid of me?"

"I'm not afraid." He touched her face as he said that. He wanted to turn her face over. Singing didn't determine how good an actor was, nor did knowledge of the opera determine how good an actor was. Those were but bonuses, the most important thing was still her acting skills.

...He didn't believe Ning Ning had that. The truth would be known as long as she turned her face over to look at the camera. She was still that good trash who could make no other expressions besides flaring her nostrils.

"...You should be scared." Ning Ning suddenly grabbed his unruly hand.

Then, before Chen Shuang He could react, he was hit hard by her other elbow. Just as he bent down, she hit him hard a few more times. He was hit so hard he dropped to his knees.

"There are a lot of bad people in the world." Her voice rang out from in front of him. It had the cold and cruel style of the Phantom. "Learning to fear will allow you to live a little longer."

Chen Shuang He coughed twice then looked up at her.

He had thought that he would see a smile full of hatred and madness, the same smile from the last moment of the <<Ugly Girl>> audition.

But that was not it...

Standing before him was not the Ugly Girl, neither was it Ning Ning. It was another woman.

She was not mad with despair, she also did not flare her nostrils. She had her hand lifted to cover the right side of her face, looking at him as if he was a fearless and ignorant child. She looked a little amused, a little curious, a little gentle, but it did not have a shred of ill-intent.

"Stop following me." She raised her (other) hand and pointed behind him, "Go back."

As she said that, she turned around and left, walking away silently, like a ghost who was preparing to plunge back into the darkness alone.

Her back view was simply too lonely, Chen Shuang He shouted uncontrollably, "Wait!"

She paused in her tracks and looked back with one eye, covering the other eye with her right hand. The single eye shined slightly in the darkness, it had a trace of unseen joy and expectations. It was as if it was saying, 'You still want to get close to me even knowing how scary I am?'

Scary and pure, unsociable and lonely, not trusting humans but wishing to be saved by them...The Ning Ning in front of him, was this type of scary and pitiful monster, the Phantom of the theater.

"Cut!"

Director Chen suddenly shouted.

She suddenly turned back into Ning Ning.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry!" Ning Ning came up to Chen Shuang He and apologised profusely, "Did I hurt you just now?"

Chen Shuang He shook his head. He looked at her with a complicated expression. If this was a coincidence, it was impossible for her to get in and out of a character that quickly, so as to say...this was her true acting skills? Impossible! Impossible! Impossible..... Chen Shuang He's heart was flooded by a million impossibles.

"Alright, come to my study, we will have an in-depth discussion about the Phantom character." Director Chen told Ning Ning with a pleasant smile on his face, then he looked over to Chen Shuang He and narrowed his eyes. "As for you...I think you are better off going back to acting in < <Ugly Girl> >, the way you are right now is not suitable to act as Lu Yun He."

Chen Shuang He froze on the spot.

In the study, Director Chen started talking just as Ning Ning sat down, "Your Phantom still has some flaws."

Ning Ning was surprised, "What flaws?"

"You are still lacking in charisma." Director Chen wrote the word *phantom* on a piece of paper and pointed at it. "The Phantom is a very complicated character. She has a scary side as well as a charismatic side. Let's put it like this. When she is not angry or is killing anyone, she is a genius. With graceful movements, a moving voice, a mysterious smile, she was more ladylike than any lady, especially when she sings on stage....."

Director Chen paused deliberately and looked at Ning Ning, before saying word for word, "When she smiles, everyone smiles; when she cries, everyone cries."

Ning Ning took a deep breath, she felt that Director Chen's opinion of the Phantom was too high...

"You can do it." Chen Guan Chao stared at her, his eyes had that familiar fanatical look which made chills run down her spine. "You can already portray most of her already, you're only missing one small bit...Don't worry, I will help you. I will give it my all to cultivate you, I will definitely turn you into the second Ning Yu Ren!"

It was not until she walked out the front door that Ning Ning realised her back was drenched in cold sweat.

Her phone rang, it was Manager Li Bo Yue.

He pressed her after she answered the call, "How was it?"

"The Phantom is mine." Ning Ning replied.

"That's great!" A car whizzed and stopped in front of Ning Ning, Li Bo Yue winded down the window and gave her a thumbs up. "Let's go! We'll have a feast to celebrate!"

Ning Ning got into the car, Li Bo Yue impatiently asked her about the audition. She spared no details and laughed bitterly at the end.

"It's only a remake, Director Chen's expectation is too high."

"That is his magnum opus after all." Li Bo Yue casually said, "He can't make it worse."

"What did you say?" Ning Ning thought he was joking with her, so she laughed to go along with him. "A crap film, when did it become his magnum opus?"

"...Lady, you can only make this kind of joke in front of me. Never let anyone else hear this, understand?" Li Bo Yue was stunned, his expression turned serious.

Ning Ning laughed twice, but her smile slowly faded when she saw how serious he remained. She asked doubtfully, "What is it? You don't think the first version of <<Phantom of the Theater>> was crappy?"

"Look it up on Baidu yourself." Li Bo Yue couldn't be bothered with her anymore.

Ning Ning opened Baidu on her mobile phone and keyed in <<Phantom of the Theater>>. Once the results were loaded she had a shock.

Chapter 35

35: For You

"< <Phantom of the Theater> > Wins Best Film"

"Deep Analysis of < <Phantom of the Theater> > What is So Good About It?"

"Understanding the Classic Lines From < <Phantom of the Theater> >."

"Actor Bai Rong: Being able to act in < <Phantom of the Theater> > is the luckiest thing that has happened in my life."

...What was going on? Did Director Chen hire people to write positively about his film on the internet? But it was impossible to do it to this extent. Every critic website actually increased their score for < <Phantom of the Theater> > from an average of 4 to an average of 9, they even made up such high box office numbers and awards, what was Director Chen thinking?

The fingers with which Ning Ning were using to swipe on her phone froze, it stopped on a post.

The title of the post was: *"Exposing the True Tragedy That Happened While Filming < <Phantom of the Theater> >."*

Ning Ning stared at the title for a while before tapping on the link.

At first glance there was an old photo. In the photo was Orchid Theater from 1988, there was a row of people standing in front of the entrance, she recognised every single one of them—they were all from the movie she just got out of! The director, the actors and the rest of the crew!

Ning Ning's chest heaved, she felt her breaths turning a little heavy.

"Right, what do you want to eat for dinner?" Her manager asked as he was driving.

"Anything." Ning Ning didn't have time to think about dinner at the moment. She took two deep breaths then she began to read the content of the post word by word.

A draft of an interview was uploaded with the post.

The interviewee was Director Chen who was young, vigorous and in his prime.

"The success of <<Phantom of the Theater>> lies within a murder case." He spoke his mind in front of the reporter, "No one would have watched my film if not for the murder case."

How did a film from, essentially, a new face attract the attention of the public? It relied on the news of someone's death.

In 1987, on the eve of the day <<Phantom of the Theater>> was supposed to begin filming, the Socialite who was supposed to act as the Wealthy Lady was murdered.

"When the movie was released, there were two types of people in the audience." Chen Guan Chao said, "One was the people who came to watch the movie, the other was the people who came to look at the murderer."

Not long after the Socialite died, rumours started swirling in the public. Every newspaper had "Orchid Theater", "Phantom of the Theater", "Murderer" in its headlines, some tabloids even made up the details of the murder without a baseline. It was unknown whether all of them thought alike or if someone paid them off, every newspaper had the same person as the murderer—Miss Wen.

"Who is Miss Wen? She was a rookie actress." Chen Guan Chao said, "She was a very hardworking and talented actress. For the sake of acting as the Phantom, she spent long periods of time sleeping in a coffin, not consuming warm food and drinks, she even cut off interactions with other people...I really liked this part of her."

He said that he liked her, but he never helped clear her name. It was not until <<Phantom of the Theater>> started showing in cinemas that he told the truth to the public. He told everyone that she was not a murderer, she was but another victim, she even saved someone and perished along with the actual murderer. Before that, there were all sorts of rumours flooding the public, the smaller newspapers were still saying that Miss Wen was the actual murderer.

"No, no, no. Those small papers wrote that themselves, I did not pay them off to have them write it." Chen Guan Chao laughed as he answered the reporters queries, "I was only staying silent, that is not illegal right? Of course, to compensate her, I have already found a place for the child she left behind. I believe that her spirit will forgive me for the sake of the child."

In the pursuit of art, in the pursuit of a movie, in the pursuit of the

market, he was so unscrupulous, stooping low enough to sacrifice the reputation of the dead.

Was this type of person worth forgiveness? There were two types of replies in the post. One felt that he could be forgiven, the other type felt that he was inhumane. The two camps argued with each other, suddenly another discussion emerged. "Hmm? Is the person on the right most side of the photo Ning Yu Ren?"

Ning Ning was dazed for a while, she scrolled back to the photo at the start. To her surprise, a young Mama was really in the photo.

It was not just Ning Ning, the other netizens were also very surprised. Someone said, "What the hell, my goddess took part in this movie too? What did she act as? Why didn't I see her?"

The netizens went digging for information. Upon doing so, they found out that Ning Yu Ren had actually spent time with the cast, and she was not there for a small role, she was the reserve for the Phantom! After tragedy befell Miss Wen, logically speaking she should have taken over as the Phantom, why did it end up being Bai Rong? Why did she leave the cast without a word? Why did the natural-born director and natural-born actress cut off their relations at the beginning of this movie?

There were too many truths hidden in the rubble of time.

Too many things were misinterpreted as the truth!

Ning Ning suddenly closed the post and began to search for the video source of < <Phantom of the Theater> >. They could make up news, they could edit the photos, but they could not fabricate the actual movie!

She found the video and tapped on the play button!

The opening theme song started playing, Li Bo Yue looked at her from the corner of his eyes. "You're watching this again even after watching it many times before?"

Ning Ning did not answer him, her eyes were locked onto the screen. For the sake of researching the role of Phantom, she had already watched this movie ten plus times, so she was very certain that the movie she had seen before and the movie she was watching now were two completely different movies!

"...It really changed." She mumbled, she suddenly turned over to Li Bo Yue and said, "Can we do this another time?"

Li Bo Yue was puzzled, "Hmm?"

"I just remembered that I have something important to do." Ning Ning said, "Can we eat together on another day?"

Li Bo Yue agreed. He wanted to send her home, but Ning Ning rejected him, "Let me off here, I will take a taxi."

She did not go home when she got on the taxi, instead she took a deep breath and told the driver an address, "35 Rouge Street, thank you."

35 Rouge Street, entrance of Life Theater.

With the sound of a car coming to a screeching halt, the Doorman who was dozing off while leaning on the wall slowly opened his eyes. He looked at the mobile phone in front of him then his sight followed the mobile phone up towards Ning Ning's face.

Ning Ning raised the mobile phone in front of him and stared at him, "It was all real, right?"

Her phone was playing < < Phantom of the Theater > > . Ning Ning deliberately seeked to the end of the movie, the Phantom had died on the vast snowy ground. As she was dying, she held the hand of the male lead, she smiled gently. "Before I met you, I have always been a ghost, because of you, I was able to come alive."

"...The original ending was not like this, this is..." Ning Ning gulped, "This was what happened to me..."

A gust of wind blew past, it shook the two clusters of lanterns in front of the entrance. Ning Ning looked up at the signboard of the theater, she looked at the three big words "*Life Movie Theater*".

"...What exactly is this place?" Ning Ning mumbled, "Why did the things that happen in the movie come true?"

"I have already told you." The Doorman finally spoke, he told her slowly, "Don't come back here anymore, this place is not as good as you imagine it to be."

Ning Ning did not think much of his words previously, but now she felt chills.

Especially because of the countless staff members standing within the door behind him.

They were all wearing a mask, but the masks were unable to mask the greed and desire in their eyes. Suddenly, a little lady wearing a *qipao* with the mask of a lady took out a movie ticket and handed it to her, "For you."

Then a woman with a crying old woman mask took out a movie ticket and handed it to her, "For you."

After that, a third, a fourth, each and every staff member took out a movie ticket. Countless black legs stood upon the entrance of the theater, countless pale hands reached out towards Ning Ning, countless voices converged together, voices of all ages told her, "For you."

Ning Ning had once longed for a movie ticket, but at this moment, she could not help but took two steps back, her back was feeling a mild chill.

Seeing her retreat, a staff member wearing a scholar mask seemed a little impatient. He rushed out from the inside and shouted as he shoved the ticket into Ning Ning's hands, "For you, for you!"

But an arm reached out from behind him and grabbed his hair, forcefully pulling him back. Once he was pulled back, another arm slowly raised towards him.

Ning Ning was stunned by what happened next.

Chapter 36

36: The Real Inheritance

"Let me go! Let me go!" The Scholar Mask's head was forced back. He was dragged backward by that boney hand right up until he collided into a hard chest.

The Doorman pushed his chest against the Scholar Mask, his left hand ruthlessly grabbed onto the Scholar Mask's hair. He slowly raised his right hand and gently placed it on the mask of the Scholar Mask.

"...No! *Cough, cough.* Don't do it!" the Scholar Mask suddenly sounded like he was choking on water. It looked like he was sweating, water was flowing continuously down his neck—no, that was not sweat, no one could sweat that much.

It was like someone had turned on a tap, there was no end to the water which was flowing down from the mask. *Splish, splash.* It was hitting the floor and was quickly forming a small puddle of water.

The Doorman suddenly released his hand gently, the Scholar Mask bent over and knelt down in the puddle of water. The water splashed onto Ning Ning's face, she couldn't wipe it, however. She was watching the Scholar Mask with chills—no, she could no longer call him Scholar Mask at this point of time.

The mask on his face had changed from a frivolous scholar face to a painful drowning face. He struggled to peel off the mask with both his hands, but the mask was like his face, he could not take it off no matter how hard he tried. Even if he started smashing his face he could not smash the mask apart. The only thing that happened was that the water continued flowing onto the floor, spreading about like snakes, flowing towards Ning Ning's feet.

Ning Ning was so frightened that she started retreating, afraid of letting the water touch her.

"I...*gurgle, gurgle...*I was wrong..." Opposite of Ning Ning, the Scholar Mask had already crawled back to the Doorman's feet. He was hugging the Doorman's legs and was piteously begging, "Forgive me, forgive me...*gurgle, gurgle...*"

The Doorman was indifferent to his begging, he slowly turned his head around. Underneath his snow-white mask, a seemingly familiar

pair of eyes looked at Ning Ning.

Ning Ning suddenly shivered, she turned tail and ran.

"Stop! Stop!" She raised her hand to hail the taxi by the road. She frantically opened the door to the car and told the driver her home address as she entered.

As the taxi started to drive off, she turned around to take a look.

Not far behind, two clusters of lanterns waved in the air, as if they were two funeral banners at a mourning hall. The Doorman stood beneath the banners, looking at her from afar.

Ning Ning slowly turned back and held her face in her hands.

"It can't be." She said quietly, "It can't be him...*sob...blargh...*"

It might be that she was too frightened, or it might have been something else, the dizziness from two days ago reappeared. Ning Ning bent down and retched painfully.

"Hey hey! Don't vomit in the car!" The driver panicked. "I will stop the car by the road, vomit after you get off!"

Ning Ning raised her head with difficulty and said, "Bring, bring me to First Hospital....."

She fainted before she could finish talking.

A few hours later, City First Hospital.

Ning Ning opened her eyes on the hospital bed. She groaned painfully in her heart when she saw someone by her side, so she closed her eyes again.

"It's alright, you don't have to pretend." Cui Hong Mei said blandly as she peeled an apple, "I saw you opened your eyes."

Ning Ning opened her eyes impatiently. "Why are you here?"

"The hospital called me over." Cui Hong Mei took a bite out of the peeled apple. Although this old woman was getting on in her years, she was more hale and hearty than any young people, she even had good teeth, as evidenced by the crunch when she bit the apple. "I paid for you, it totals up to three thousand dollars; including chest X-Ray, ECG, blood lipid examination..."

"Yes, yes, yes. You can leave the bill, I will transfer the money to you later." Ning Ning didn't want to hear her nonsense.

"...You are not interested in the results?" Cui Hong Mei said.

Ning Ning opened her eyes again and looked at her.

Cui Hong Mei held a medical report in her hands. She read the results of the examination word by word for Ning Ning, ending lightly with, "And the white blood cell count is at 2800, around half of what a normal person should have. The doctor asked me what you do for a living. If you were dealing with radioactive transmissions for extended periods of time."

She looked up and smiled at Ning Ning, "How is it? Doesn't it sound familiar?"

Ning Ning laid on the bed and looked stupidly at the ceiling above her .

It was familiar, how could it not be?

The first time Mama was hospitalised, she received the same medical report. The white blood cell count was exactly the same, the other values were only off by a single digit!

"First it was your mother, now it's you." Cui Hong Mei viciously took a bite out of the apple and spoke inarticulately, "What exactly are you two hiding from me?"

Ning Ning was still looking stupidly at the ceiling.

"...I really want to confide in someone, but that someone is not you." After a while, she slowly turned over. "Why did you treat Mama that way?"

Cui Hong Mei stopped chewing and looked at Ning Ning with no expression.

"You are too scary, you are even scarier than a stranger." Ning Ning stared at her, "Mama treated you so well, she gave you everything you wanted. Everyone knew how shameless you were, but she had never said anything bad about you. Not to mention outsiders, even I felt that she was a little silly...How about you? What did you do to her?"

"A stranger." Cui Hong Mei slowly chewed on the words, before suddenly laughing coldly. "Are you even sure she was real?"

Ning Ning was stunned.

Cui Hong Mei paused for a while then closed her eyes. "...Was she my real daughter?"

"...What do you mean?" Ning Ning asked.

"You don't know anything, you don't remember anything..." Cui

Hong Mei lowered her head and mumbled, as if she remembered something from her memory, her expression showed a trace of abhorrence, fear rippled over...it even had a little grievance. "Everyone changes, but no one would change like she did...A stranger. Yes! A stranger! Don't you think that she had transformed into a stranger, into someone who was not whom you remembered her to be?"

Cui Hong Mei started to get excited, it was like she had found the answer to the problem, the standard answer to the formula that had troubled her for years. She gesticulated with her hands and feet. "That's right, technology is so advanced now. You can have someone else's looks with plastic surgery..."

"Enough!" Ning Ning shouted loudly to interrupt her as she could not bear it any longer. She stared at Cui Hong Mei while stressing, word by word, "She was Mama. She had always been Mama."

She did not know why Cui Hong Mei distrusted Mama so much to the extent that she thought Mama was a (fake) stranger who had plastic surgery done to look like Mama. But as someone who had the movie ticket and had visited Life Theater, Ning Ning knew, Mama had always been Mama. Her change was only due to her staying in a movie for too long.

Just like herself. After she went through two movies, hadn't she changed a lot as well?

Cui Hong Mei opened her mouth slightly, looking like she wanted to confide something to Ning Ning, but upon hearing what Ning Ning said, she no longer wanted to tell her anymore.

"...I'm leaving." She tossed the unfinished apple before turning around and leaving the words, "Remember to transfer the money to me and take good care of your health. Your mother is gone, my life is your responsibility."

Bitterly sarcastic, with eyes only for money, she had returned to the Cui Hong Mei Ning Ning remembered.

Clop, clop, clop. The sound of footsteps started to get further. Just as Cui Hong Mei was about to leave the room, she suddenly stopped in her tracks and asked without turning back, "Ning Ning...do you think this world is real?"

Ning Ning was originally resting with eyes closed on her bed, she opened her eyes from shock due to what she had just heard, but Cui Hong Mei was nowhere to be seen anymore.

Only the question she had posed echoed in Ning Ning's ears.

Do you think this world is real?

A doctor came in, he was mildly surprised as his eyes met with Ning Ning. He smiled and said, "You're up already."

He was acting familiar as if he was talking to a junior from his family. Ning Ning treated him as a senior of the family as well, for he was the doctor in charge of Mama. He was with Mama for the eight years she required medical attention. Ning Ning even knew that he was interested in Mama, but Mama had never accepted him.

She told the driver to send her to First Hospital without hesitation because she was familiar with someone here.

He walked to the front of her bed wanting to say something, but he stopped himself.

"Uncle Huang, is something the matter?" Ning Ning asked.

Doctor Huang came back to his senses. He took out a letter from the pocket of his big white coat and handed it to her.

Ning Ning looked at him uncertainly without taking it. "This is?"

"Your mother entrusted me to give this letter to you." Doctor Huang's face was full of doubt. "She told me, if there was to be a day that you developed the same illness as her, I should hand this letter to you."

Ning Ning frantically snatched the letter from his hands and tore open the envelope, she poured the contents out.

There was a letter and a key.

Ning Ning opened the letter, there was Ning Yu Ren's familiar handwriting on it. She wrote two sentences in the letter.

"If you read this letter it would mean that you have already begun walking down my old path."

"I left something for you, it is placed at 404 Yang Ming Road, the key is in the envelope."

404 Yang Ming Road was a small apartment building.

Ignoring Doctor Huang's advice, Ning Ning rushed to finish her discharge papers. Doctor Huang took a day off and followed her. Ning Yu Ren bought the apartment building, but the name on the property certificate was his. He was not only the safekeeper for the letter, he was also the caretaker of the items.

The apartment building was not tall. It was four storeys high, each level could fit a family of three. On their way to the unit, every tenant called out cordially to Doctor Huang, addressing him as Landlord. He brought Ning Ning to unit 404. He told her as he opened the door, "This is the room your mother used to keep her things in. I have not touched anything inside, I have only gone in occasionally to tidy up."

The door was opened, Ning Ning walked in slowly.

"I'll be around, call for me if you need anything." Doctor Huang closed the door as he finished talking, leaving the room completely to Ning Ning.

Ning Ning was too busy to pay attention to him. She slowly looked at her surroundings, all she saw was that the room was crammed with masks hanging from the left to right.

Male, female, old, young, Ning Ning could not help but feel uncomfortable being surrounded by so many masks, she even had the misconception that she was back in Life Theater. She hugged herself uncontrollably and left the living room hurriedly, entering the next room.

The room could not be considered to be a bedroom as there was no bed in the room. There was only a television, a DVD player, a video recorder and a chair. Young people these days were used to downloading and watching movies on their computer, but Ning Yu Ren had kept her habit of watching DVDs and videotapes as she belonged to another generation.

There were no DVDs nor videotapes to be found in the room, so Ning Ning could only return to the living room. She found a safe among the masks. She used the key in her hand to open the safe, there were DVDs and videotapes placed neatly within.

But in the middle of the safe was a smaller safe.

There was a sentence written on the smaller safe, 'When is our anniversary?'

"Year 2012 March 21st." Ning Ning entered the code 2012321 as she mumbled to herself. *Clank*. The safe opened, within it was yet another DVD.

Ning Ning grabbed the DVD and returned to the bedroom frantically. She turned on the television and the DVD player, placing the DVD into the player, she rushed over to the television without bothering to sit on the chair. She knelt in front of the television and looked at the screen without moving.

After a short pause, Ning Yu Ren's face appeared on the screen.

She opened her eyes and looked at Ning Ning through the screen, "Do you want to ask me what kind of place Life Theater is exactly?"

Ning Ning was stunned.

"The answer is—" Ning Yu Ren smiled mischievously. "I don't know either."

At that moment, Ning Ning raised her hands and covered her mouth, she could not help but whimper.

Mama was the best actress. Everyone said that it felt like she was smiling directly at you when she smiled on the television. Ning Ning was feeling the same way as everyone else right now. Mama was still alive. In the television, on screen, eternally.

"No matter what its purpose is, to me it is a place to hone my acting skills." Ning Yu Ren smiled and said, "Oh right, have I died? Did your grandmother come to you and cause trouble? For example, to ask you for money or to auction the things I left behind."

At this juncture, Ning Yu Ren covered her lips and laughed lightly.

"I have my reasons for condoning her, but you don't have to do the same. Just giving her a monthly allowance will be enough. If she wants to auction the things I left behind when she runs out of money..." Ning Yu Ren tilted her head and gave it a thought, then she blinked at Ning Ning. "Then let her auction them."

"Mama!" Ning Ning lunged forward like she had forgotten that she was watching the television. She draped herself on the screen, anxiously wanting to say something.

"The proof that I have lived in this world was never the clothes I've worn, nor the jewelry I had, even more so for my socks and underwear." Ning Yu Ren looked at her gently, "It's you."

Ning Ning looked at her blankly.

"...and the masks outside." Ning Yu Ren took a look behind Ning Ning, her eyes full of nostalgia. "Every mask was a person I have transmigrated as, they were all lives which I have experienced. This room... is my Life Theater!"

The aged Ning Yu Ren smiled gently, it was an amazing smile that passed through time, approaching eternity. After she smiled, she looked at Ning Ning's face once more and said to her, "Alright, look under the DVD player."

Ning Ning raised her hand and wiped her tears, she reached under the DVD player with her right hand and found three movie tickets.

"I left them for you." Ning Yu Ren said gently, "One day, you will also be able to build a Life Theater which belongs to you, but before that, we have to promise each other three things."

Ning Yu Ren's expression and voice turned serious as she said that.

"...Life Theater is definitely not a place specifically for us to hone our acting skills, it is very strange." Ning Yu Ren said deeply, "I suspect that we are not transmigrating into movies, but to the past."

Ning Ning looked at Ning Yu Ren while holding onto the movie tickets tightly.

"The past can be changed." Ning Yu Ren held up two fingers. "But not more than twice. Remember that? Repeat after me!"

"The past can be changed." Ning Ning repeated her words on conditioned reflex, "But not more than twice."

"Very good." Ning Yu Ren put down her hand and continued, "Also, the extent to which we can change the content differs from ticket to ticket. Generally speaking, we are safe as long as we do not change the fate of the main character."

Ning Ning nodded seriously as she kept her words in mind.

"Even as a last resort, do not accept a ticket from the staff members, and...never ever sneak in without a ticket!" Ning Yu Ren suddenly furrowed her brows. "Did you listen to me carefully?"

"Never accept a ticket from the staff members, never sneak in without a ticket!" Ning Ning frantically repeated after her.

Ning Yu Ren loosened her expression and smiled faintly at Ning Ning. She reached out with one hand and gently placed it on the screen, Ning Ning could not help but raise up her hand and place it on Ning Yu Ren's hand, the two of them stared at each other through the screen for a very long time.

"Ning Ning," tears wobbled in Ning Yu Ren's eyes, "I love you."

"Mama," tears wobbled in Ning Ning's eyes too, "I love you too."

The content of the DVD ended here.

Ning Ning wiped her tears and rewinded the DVD, she watched it a few times. It was not until Doctor Huang called her out of worry that she stopped watching.

She walked into the living room with the DVD in hand. She looked at the surroundings again. There were countless masks in front of her, but she had a completely different feeling this time.

"This is Mama's Life Theater." She mumbled, "This is Mama's life....."

Those man, woman, elder, child, all of them became Mama's face, looking at her gently from all directions. Ning Ning could not help but give a gentle smile, but suddenly she remembered something as her smile slowly faded.

"...Why did she say that the past can be changed, but not more than twice?" Ning Ning slowly turned her head and looked at the bedroom behind her. She looked towards the black screen on the television. "Mama, what exactly did you do?"

Chapter 37

37: Milk, Dumpling, Coriander

Three days later...

A videotape was placed in the video player.

Ning Ning returned to the chair and sat down. She raised the remote control beside her and pressed on the power button.

Ning Yu Ren appeared on the screen. This was the young Ning Yu Ren, not affected by cancer; with crystal clear skin, bright eyes, just like her name—*Yu Ren*.¹

"This is my first time transmigrating." She said to the camera, "I transmigrated to the ancient times, becoming an unloved imperial concubine. There were three thousand women in the harem, we were all vying for the same man."

She was not just narrating, she acted along with her narration.

Ning Ning held onto the remote control and watched Ning Yu Ren without moving.

She had a lot of doubts in her heart. For example, what was going on with the staff members of the movie theater? Did the masks on their faces have any connection with the masks decorating the room? Why could you only change the past twice, what happened if you changed it thrice? Mama was dead, no one could answer these questions. Ning Ning could only look for the answers through Mama's diary.

Ning Yu Ren was an actress. She recorded all the stories she had transmigrated to, but she didn't write them down. She recorded them in videos.

These stories were stored in pieces of DVDs and videotapes. Ning Ning had been watching them for three consecutive days. She thus discovered a secret—someone who was labelled as a genius actress by the public was no genius at all.

Ning Yu Ren was also a normal person. She was also poor at acting in the beginning. But after she transmigrated as different people and gained more life experiences, she finally gained quality through quantity!

But everything has a beginning.

The beginning of this was in the videotape in front of her!

"...This was my first transmigration, my first life." Ning Yu Ren on the screen had finished acting the last scene, she smiled and concluded (the video), "The time is 1990 July 7th."

July 7th 1990. This was the beginning of everything. On this day, someone gave Mama a movie ticket and directed her to walk into Life Theater.

This person was vital. He had to know more things than Mama. Ning Ning turned on her mobile phone. She searched for the period around July 7th 1990, then murmured at the phone screen, "The Person within the Painting."

On April 10th 1990, Director Shi Quan filmed a historical movie (titled) <<The Person within the Painting>> and picked a relatively unknown minor actress Ning Yu Ren. He gave her the role of the supporting female Yan Hong Xiu. This film was the beginning of Ning Yu Ren's acting career. This was where she started her road into becoming a movie empress.

"Director Shi Quan, starring Shi Zhong Tang, You Ling, Ning Yu Ren, co-starring..." Ning Ning looked through the cast, they were all reputable directors and actors at that time. But now some of them had passed away, some had retired from the industry, some were married into a rich family. The only two people who were still active in the industry were only a costume designer and a fight scene choreographer, but she knew neither of them.

She thought about it, who at this moment could be of help to her? Who knew people in the industry and was able to contact these two?

Ning Ning gave Manager Li Bo Yue a call.

"Liu Shi Mei and Tao Yun?" Li Bo Yue asked doubtfully, "What? Why are you looking for them?"

"I want to ask them some questions." Ning Ning said, "...About my mom while she was filming <<The Person within the Painting>>."

"<<The Person within the Painting>>?" Li Bo Yue laughed. "Then you don't have to ask them, there is someone better suited."

Ning Ning was stunned, "Who?"

"Remember the psychiatrist I recommended whose appointment you skipped out on?" Li Bo Yue Said, "He is the adopted son of

Director Shi Quan, his name is Wen Yu."

Later in the afternoon, at the entrance of a restaurant.

Li Bo Yue gave Ning Ning a call, "Are you here yet?"

"I am here." Ning Ning answered the call as she looked at the entrance of the restaurant.

She had arrived fifteen minutes earlier, but for some reason she loitered around the entrance, afraid to go in. The name Wen Yu reverberated in her mind, giving her a familiar feeling.

"Maybe it's another person sharing the same name." She told herself, "Ning Ning, don't think that it's him just based on the name."

Ning Ning pushed the door and entered the restaurant after making mental preparations. She scanned the surroundings once. Someone from the table by the left wall waved at her, it was Li Bo Yue.

She walked towards him, her vision gradually fell to the man seated with his back facing her.

It was a man of great stature in a grey suit.

Music flowed beside him, a pianist was playing the piano in the middle of the restaurant, he was playing <<You Flow in My Memory Forever>>, better known as <<River Flows in You>>, a sad and gentle piano tune.

"Hello." Ning Ning sat across from him and reached out a hand, "I am Ning Ning, nice to meet you."

The man sitting opposite her raised his head.

It was an unfamiliar face, an unfamiliar man.

If you describe Wen Yu from her memory as a little angel, like someone made of cotton candy, gentle and sweet; then the man in front of her was like a relief sculpture of a bigger angel within the walls of a church, marble-casted, hard, eternal, with looks and a body that were near perfection.

"Hello, Wen Yu." He shook her outstretched hand, his voice was special and moving, giving off an awe-inspiring, noble and unsullied feeling. "I heard you have business with me?"

Ning Ning looked down at his hand, it was a hand that wore a white glove.

"Yes." She quickly looked up and smiled at him. "I have a question for your father. Is it possible for you to arrange a meeting with him

for me?"

Wen Yu lightly shook his head. "Apologies, my father is currently hospitalised, the doctor says he needs to recuperate."

They shook hands for a mere five seconds for the first time, they spoke for a mere five seconds for the first time. They loosened their fingers, looking at each other, Ning Ning was at a loss of words momentarily.

"Right, what would the two of you like to drink?" Li Bo Yue interrupted from the side.

Wen Yu, "Milk."

Ning Ning, "Milk."

The two of them looked at each other silently as they finished talking.

"What a coincidence." Li Bo Yue laughed from the side. "The two of you have similar tastes."

"Personal habit, couldn't get rid of it." Wen Yu replied blandly, "My living conditions were not that great when I was young, the people who knew me would always make a drink out of milk candy for me."2

Ning Ning made a small movement with her finger on the table.

...She had only ever seen two people make a drink out of milk candy.

In <<Abandoned Child>>, in the year 1987, milk candy was flourishing in China. It was a luxurious type of candy, its price was seven times that of a normal candy. There was also a rumour that you could make a drink out of milk candy and substitute actual milk with it.

Chen Guan Chao who had grown up abroad said that he had heard of it but not experienced it. Curiosity got the better of him so he bought a big bag of milk candy to try it out. He could not even finish a cup of the drink so he gave out the rest of the candy (to other people)...The amount he gave out to each person was based on acting skills, so Ning Ning received the most candy.

But she didn't like sweets.

"For you." So she turned around and gave them to Wen Yu.

As a result, after she came back from training on the following day, she saw Wen Yu holding onto a cup as he waited for her. The cup was

steaming with white steam, a milky-white liquid was in it, there were still bits of candy that had not fully melted floating on top of it.

Because she simply could not dissuade him, Ning Ning pulled her long hair behind her ear, lowered her head and took a sip from his hands, then she looked up. "You finish the rest."

< <River Flows in You> > was still flowing by their ears, Li Bo Yue raised his hand to call a waiter over. He smiled at them and said, "Might as well order some snacks, the food from this restaurant is pretty good."

Ning Ning and Wen Yu opened the menu at the same time, flipped three pages at the same time.

Wen Yu, "Dumplings."

Ning Ning, "Dumplings."

The two of them looked at each other silently as they looked up from the menu.

"...Hehe, hehe, milk with dumplings, the two of you really have similar tastes." Li Bo Yue felt that he was quickly becoming a voice recorder.

Ning Ning smiled along with him, the man sitting across her also smiled faintly. He was not like the little Wen Yu from her memory, other than his tastes in food.

"Let's order other snacks." Ning Ning opened the menu and looked at him. "Do you have anything you don't eat?"

"I can eat everything." Wen Yu answered in an urbane manner.

"Then we will have a plate of crystal shrimp dumplings, phoenix claw³, beef siew mai, beancurd rolls, and lastly..." Ning Ning closed the menu. "Agaric and coriander dumplings."

The snacks were served. Wen Yu who claimed that he would eat anything kept a distance from the agaric and coriander dumplings. *He has the same likes and dislikes*. Ning Ning looked at him, slightly in a trance. Li Bo Yue coughed from the side as she was too focused in staring at him.

"What business do you have with my father?" Wen Yu suddenly asked.

Ning Ning came back to her senses. "I want to ask him about the things that happened during the filming of < <The Person within the Painting> >."

"Ask away." Wen Yu said.

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment, she had not comprehended the situation.

"What a coincidence." Wen Yu put down his chopsticks and leaned back on the sofa. "I was with the cast during that period of time, what did you want to ask?"

Although the situation was slightly different from what she anticipated, she finally found someone who knew what happened. Ning Ning closed her eyes for a while before reopening them. "I would like to ask, during that period of time, were there any strange people around my mom, Ning Yu Ren?"

"...Ning Yu Ren." Wen Yu had a weird reaction to this name. At first he slowly repeated the name once, then he closed his eyes and thought for a while. He opened his eyes and told Ning Ning, "From what I've seen, the cast at that time was a little special—everyone in it was strange."

...Aren't you wasting your breath?

"But the strangest person was still my brother." Wen Yu asked, "Have you heard of the name Shi Zhong Tang?"

Of course Ning Ning knew, she had done her homework before coming here. Shi Zhong Tang, the most famous actor in the 80s-90s. Because he acted in a wuxia film as the lead male actor, he became popular all over China, becoming the ideal "husband" of thousands of girls at that time.

"My brother was the most famous actor at that time, the future of his acting career was resplendent. But after filming <<The Person within the Painting>>, he suddenly committed suicide, no one knows why." Wen Yu said blandly, "I am in the same boat as you, I also want to know what he experienced in that period of time. Did someone strange appear beside him, said something or did something to him?"

...Not only did she not get an answer, the number of questions grew...

After leaving the restaurant, Ning Ning respectfully rejected the two of them when they offered to send her back, she walked on the streets alone.

It was not until a familiar building came into view that she stopped walking. She raised her head and mumbled, "Why did I come back."

The first time she saw it, it was a rest stop amongst a storm. The second time she saw it, it was a golden palace brightening up her life. But looking at it now, the hand which Ning Ning used to clutch her purse while trembling non-stop.

It was late at night, the two clusters of lanterns at the entrance were not lit by anyone. They suddenly lit up by themselves, like demons in the night, suddenly opening their eyes.

"I don't want to go in..." Ning Ning muttered, she was scared. There was a voice in her heart which was telling her, there were many ways to hone her acting skills, she didn't need to enter Life Theater, especially now that she had been recognised by Director Chen, she could land a lot of roles. Even if she didn't rely on him, she could use the valuable experience she had gotten from the two times she had transmigrated, she could get better...

But the moment she saw the new poster, the voice in her heart fell silent.

Title: < <The Person within the Painting> >

Starring: Shi Zhong Tang

1Yu Ren(玉人) directly translates to jade person2They are referring to a very specific brand of milk candy here, namely White Rabbit3Phoenix claw is the name for chicken feet in Chinese cuisine.

TN: A reader commented in the previous chapter that he or she would like to pay for chapters to be released quickly. While we do have chapters stockpiled, there aren't that many and some of them are not ready to be released. We came up with the idea of doing kofi goals for people who are interested.

It will be a goal for a third release for the week, the third release will be on Sundays and the goal will only reset for the next week if the goal is met, it will not reset when the week is up. The rationale for this is that we do not want to set goals that we might not be able to fulfill, as if we did a goal for a chapter with no limits we might not be able to cope with the volume of work required.

Please leave a comment on whether this would be something you guys would be interested in, we would hate it if people gave us the money and it goes to waste because the goal is never met. (link: <https://raedmore.com/>)

Chapter 38

38: Odd-Numbered Designated Ticket

Ning Ning stood at the entrance (of the theater) for a very long time, before slowly walking towards the poster.

A shadow loomed over her, she looked up, the Doorman was standing in front of her.

He didn't say a word, but he was more compelling than one who was loquacious. Ning Ning took two steps back as she was unable to bear the imposing aura emanating from his body. However, she walked forward again defiantly and said to him, "Let me in!"

"You don't have a ticket." He said coldly.

"No!" Ning Ning carelessly grabbed three tickets out of her purse, these were the inheritance from her mother. She raised them up and showed them to him, "I have tickets!"

The instance the Doorman saw the tickets in her hand, his expression changed into something extremely scary.

There was no wind, but the tickets were shaking. It did not come from the tickets, it was from the hand that was holding them. Her heart was obviously scared out of her life, but Ning Ning still strained her throat and told him, "Let me in!"

The Doorman shifted his vision onto her face, he was visibly in rage. "It's not time yet!"

It was only 8pm, there were four whole hours till midnight.

How should I kill time?

The Doorman clenched his fist like he was forcibly restraining the anger in his mind. He pointed to a restaurant opposite with his chin, "Go have a meal, go home early after you are done...or watch a movie with a friend, sing karaoke? You must have other things to do, stop loitering in front of me all the time!"

He could not hold back his temper at the end of the sentence. But if you look at it carefully, rather than rage, it looked more like an indescribable anxiety.

Ning Ning looked at him for a while before turning around and

heading to the restaurant. Before the Doorman could breathe a sigh of relief, he heard footsteps approaching him again. He looked up and saw her running back. She had plastic bags in her left hand, a cup of milk tea in her right hand, she handed them to him, "Do you want to eat?"

The Doorman did not accept her bribe, he stared at her and told her word for word instead, "Why are you always unwilling to listen to me?"

Ning Ning looked away, she could not point out what she was afraid of. Was it his overwhelming ferocious demeanour? Or was it his overly familiar eyes?

She looked at the poster beside him and said, "My mom will be in today's movie."

The Doorman, "..."

"I want to meet her." Ning Ning walked away from him towards the poster. "I have a lot of questions for her."

Time could be fleeting, but as long as you wanted it, every second could be put to good use.

Like now.

Ning Ning stopped in front of the poster, then she began to investigate it.

The two previous transmigrations told her that the content of the poster was actually very important.

An unassuming detail might be the most important clue that run through the whole movie—for example, the small wooden box on the poster of < <Republic Circus> > . The surroundings depicted on the poster might very well be a hint of the environment the lead character was in—for example, the people who were gossiping in the surroundings of Wen Yu who would eventually sink in a swamp.

The poster this time as compared to the two previous times was...too ordinary.

It looked like an ordinary promotional poster for an ancient idol drama. There was an elegant man in white ancient costume. He held a brush in his left hand, his right hand was behind his body, he was painting on a fine writing paper. He had just started painting an outline of what seemed to be a person.

The brush was an ordinary brush, the paper was an ordinary paper,

the desk was an ordinary desk, the inkstone was an ordinary inkstone, the person, pen and paper were all dyed yellow from the sunset.

There was nothing strange, if you had to point something out it would be the unfinished painting.

Ning Ning could not tell what he was drawing. She swallowed and turned around with a smile that looked like she was casually chatting to pass time, "Hi, what do you think he's drawing?"

The Doorman shot a glance at her.

Ning Ning's heart thumped.

"I cannot tell you." The Doorman said.

Her hopes of getting information out of him were dashed, Ning Ning felt disappointed. Suddenly she heard him say, "Which ticket will you be using later?"

Ning Ning was stunned, "What do you mean by which ticket?"

"You have two types of tickets on hand." The Doorman said, "Ordinary ticket, and odd-numbered designated ticket."

Upon hearing this, Ning Ning frantically took out the three tickets from her purse again to check.

These three tickets looked the same on the surface, the only differences were the seat numbers. But upon closer inspection, one would discover that one of the tickets had not only seats that were close to the front, but the stamp on it also had a little word written on it with red ink: *designated*.

Thinking back on the even-number designated ticket she had used last time, Ning Ning looked up and asked, "What is the difference between this ticket and the even-numbered designated ticket? Can I designate the time I enter the movie?"

The Doorman lightly shook his head, "An even-numbered designated ticket designates the time, an odd-numbered designated ticket designates the character."

"What you mean is..." Ning Ning seemed to have understood, she looked at the odd-numbered designated ticket in her hand, feeling a little mystified. "I can designate whom I transmigrate as?"

"That's right." The Doorman said, "You can transmigrate as anyone besides the lead character, the only prerequisite is that the person has appeared in this movie."

Even-numbered designated tickets designated the time.

Odd-numbered designated tickets designated the character.

Ordinary tickets were all random.

"...Are there any other type of tickets?" Ning Ning looked up at him, "What do other tickets do?"

"I cannot tell you." The Doorman said, "You don't have the corresponding tickets on hand."

Ning Ning had noticed that he had been saying he could not, not that he would not.

In addition, he had given her a hint—as long as she had the corresponding ticket on hand, she could get the relevant information from him.

"Alright, time is almost up." The Doorman said, "Designate your character."

After a pause, he added another sentence, "...You only want to meet your mom, right? Then pick a person she knew, don't poke your nose into the lead character's business. Nothing good would come out of interacting with that type of person."

This was not the first time Ning Ning had heard this warning.

She did not understand what he was talking about before, but she did now. Combined with Mama's last words, she (knew now that she) could not change the fate of the lead character as she pleased, if not there would be terrifying repercussions. It would be alright if they did not know each other. If they did and lived together everyday, then they would influence each other in some aspects, like her and Boss Qu, or her and Wen Yu.

She looked at the Doorman with a complicated expression. As her thoughts reached this point, she had understood one thing in her mind, "He's helping me..."

"...I will." She told him, "Give me a little time, I will think of whom to transmigrate as."

Ning Ning did not know at which point of time (in the movie) she would enter, because she could not designate it. She might enter when Shi Zhong Tang was a child, or she might enter on the day he killed himself.

Under such uncertain circumstances, she had to at least guarantee one thing—when < <The Person within the Painting> > started its

filming, she had to be in the crew.

In other words, she had to transmigrate as someone in the crew.

"This person had to have a little privilege, being able to move around the cast freely." Ning Ning thought as she paced back and forth in front of the entrance of the theater, "The best occupation would be an actor, because if it was not an actor, like an editor or a fight choreographer, I would not be able to do their jobs. It would be fine if it was for a short period of time, I might be fired from the crew if it was for a long period of time..."

As she struck off the people from the crew based on her conditions, there was only one person who fit the criteria.

Ning Ning stopped in her tracks and looked at the Doorman, "I choose You Ling."

You Ling was an actress along with Mama, she acted as the second female leading character Princess Ling Shan in < <The Person Within the Painting> >.

The reason Ning Ning chose her was not only because she had fit the above-mentioned criterias, it was also because within the group of main supporting actors, she was most familiar with You Ling. This actress had a lot of similarities with Ning Ning. For example, her good looks and her singular acting path. She had only acted as beautiful vases ever since she debuted.

As such Ning Ning was once known as "Little You Ling" instead of "Little Ning Yu Ren".

From the rage in the beginning, to the empathy later on, Ning Ning could not help but look up her films and information. Now, that knowledge could be put to good use. Compared to the other strangers in the cast, she could quickly get into and better portray herself as You Ling, to avoid letting the people around her from exposing her as a fake.

"Designated character You Ling, one person per ticket, invalid upon admission." The Doorman took the odd-numbered designated ticket from her hand. He gave way to the entrance after he tore the ticket, "You may enter."

Ning Ning took a step towards the entrance. She looked at the darkness within and did not dare to take a second step.

The Doorman's voice rang out from behind her, "Don't worry, Life Theater will protect its customers while the movie is showing."

"What about when the movie ends?" Ning Ning turned back with a slightly pitiful expression.

The Doorman looked at her silently for a moment and said, "I will be there to escort you."

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment.

"I will be there to escort you." He promised her in a serious manner, his voice deep and powerful. Like dark clouds bearing down on the city threaten to overwhelm it, itching to transform into knives, transform into swords, transform into shields to protect her. "You don't have to be afraid! You don't have to be afraid of anyone!"

This protection, this care, this expression, she was almost certain of his identity, but Ning Ning did not know whether she should call him out here...she was not mentally prepared.

So she hastily turned around and gave him an affirmation with her back facing him.

"Thank you." She said softly, then she lowered her head and walked into the theater entrance in front of her.

Along the way, she saw that all the staff members stopped whatever they were doing and looked at her from behind their masks, greed and desire laid bare in their eyes. But as the Doorman had stated, they were obviously restless, but did not dare to do anything to her.

Life Theater was currently protecting her, protecting its only customer of the night.

"Here is your seat." It was the Court Lady Mask1 from the previous two times, her attitude was even more hospitable than before, her expression more passionate than before. "Do you need a drink?"

"No, no need." Ning Ning raised the milk tea in her hand towards the other. "I brought mine."

Court Lady Mask left feeling disappointed. Not long after, the lights dimmed, the screen lit up.

The first thing to appear on the screen was still that sentence.

"This film has been adapted from a true story."

Then a crisp *ding* rang out, it was like a jade chopstick knocking on a wine glass.

Ding, ding, ding. A dissolute and loud male singing voice accompanied the crisp and melodious knocking sound, "Loving wine,

loving poems, loving beauties, happy life! Lusting after wine, lusting after intoxication, lusting after a confidant, life or death of the heart!"

The singing was flowing towards her like the Milky Way, and Ning Ning's name was also like a flower beside the river, blooming sorrowfully on the poster at the entrance.

Title: < <The Person Within the Painting> >

Starring: Shi Zhong Tang, Ning Ning

1This is the same person we referred to as the "ancient female official mask", we will be going forward with using Court Lady mask to be consistent with the original translation, along with the fact that it sounds better.

Chapter 39

39: Princess Ling Shan

April 1990, Cast of < <The Person Within the Painting> >

"Come, come, come. Let's get to know each another. I am the actor for Mad Taoist Priest, Chen Nuo. Nice to meet you, nice to meet you!"

"Come on, who doesn't know you? The Taoist priest specialist."

"I am Li1 Shu, acting as the father of the lead character. *Sigh*, I'm a little excited to be treated as a father by someone for the first time."

"Hi everyone, I am the actress for Princess Ling Shan, Ning Yu Ren."

"Hi everyone, I am the actress for Princess Ling Shan, You Ling."

The two of them were stunned at the same time as they finished introducing themselves, they slowly turned their heads and looked at each other.

...This is a bit too awkward dameow2 it...

After that, even though everyone laughed, the way they looked at the two had changed. No one thought that what You Ling said was an accident, there were no accidents in the adult world! Especially in the entertainment industry, every 'accident' was thought through! It was for the sake of achieving a motive!

Even Director Shi thought so. Once the meeting ended, he spoke to You Ling alone. Seemingly smiling, he said, "That was not something to joke about, you would make everyone feel awkward this way."

You Ling, or you should say, Ning Ning who transmigrated as You Ling, forced out a bitter smile.

She was not joking! She really thought she was Princess Ling Shan!

At least in the movie that was filmed, she was Princess Ling Shan!

But now everyone thought she was a biatch who deliberately planned to snatch a role!

"Director Shi." Now that it had come to this, Ning Ning could only say with a bold face, "Actually I really think...Ning Yu Ren and I should switch roles. She is more suited for the role of Yan Hong Xiu."

Although Princess Ling Shan was the leading female role, although everyone thought that she was trying to snatch the role from Mama now, Ning Ning knew that Yan Hong Xiu was the biggest winner of the movie in the end!

After <<The Person within the Painting>> was released, the results proved the point—out of the many roles in the movie, everyone only noticed Yan Hong Xiu, they could only look at Yan Hong Xiu! Under the brilliance she displayed, every role—including the lead female role—faded into the background and was forgotten!

"So you really want to snatch this role." Director Shi.

"..." *Let's leave it at that!*

Ning Ning now felt like she was scorched by flames. Before she transmigrated, she had never thought that she would end up in such a situation. The information she had on hand and the different gossip forums had never mentioned that Mama's first role in <<The Person Within the Painting>> was actually Princess Ling Shan?

What exactly happened in the end? What was she supposed to do to make the Director switch their roles in order to let history repeat itself?

"Actually, I have considered this before." Director Shi said, "You are definitely a little more suitable for Princess Ling Shan in terms of looks, but she is a little more suitable based on acting skills."

Director Chen pondered for a moment, then he suddenly smiled. "We'll do it this way, the two of you can compete...Little Chen!"

A young man located not far away heard him and responded, he walked towards the two of them.

Ning Ning looked at the figure approaching them. As she looked at his familiar face, a thought flashed across her mind—*Director Chen, why are you everywhere!*

"This is Chen Guan Chao, a very talented young man. He is currently learning how to direct from me." Director Shi introduced him to Ning Ning, then told Chen Guan Chao, "You wrote the script, do you still remember the lines? Come help rehearse, temporarily take the role of the male lead."

Chen Guan Chao nodded, calm and composed. "Alright, which scene?"

<<The Person Within the Painting>> was an ancient fantasy romance story.

At the start of the movie, prison wagons were lined up. Authoritative officials had succeeded in overthrowing the monarchy, they transported the imperial family to the market for execution, including Princess Ling Shan.

Li Zhong Tang had been head over heels in love with Princess Ling Shan for many years. After he failed to rescue Princess Ling Shan, he risked his life to buy a lock of Princess Ling Shan's hair from the Executioner. He made a brush using the hair with the help of a mad taoist priest.

After that, as if he was a madman, he drew paintings of Princess Ling Shan day and night using this brush, until one day, the person within the painting walked out...

Having his only son infatuated with the person within the painting to the point where he was emaciated and had abandoned his career, , Father Li bought the daughter of a rotten gambler—a stunning girl named Yan Hong Xiu—under the suggestion of the people around him. He told her that she had two paths in front of her, she either seduced Li Zhong Tang or got sold to the brothel.

Yan Hong Xiu had no other choice, she could only fight for Li Zhong Tang against Princess Ling Shan.

The scene they were about to act was one of the most significant scenes—(the scene where) the person within the painting walked out!

"This scene would not be shown to outsiders." Director Shi led them to an empty room. The set within the room was done halfway, it looked vaguely like a study with paper and inkstones on the table, flutes and paintings on the wall. Director Shi asked, "How much time do the two of you need? Who will go first?"

Ning Ning hesitated to speak, she could not go first, she had just received the script, she had not even gone over her lines.

Ning Yu Ren shot a glance at Ning Ning, then turned her sights on Director Shi and simply said, "I'll do it."

Her voice and attitude were very cold. Ning Ning initially thought that she was not happy with her 'role snatching'. It was only after Ning Yu Ren got on the stage where Ning Ning slowly realised that something was not right.

"I"

Chen Guan Chao circled behind the desk. He randomly picked a brush from the brush rack, then dipped it on an empty inkstone before

returning to the paper. The change in him from 1987 to 1990 was very drastic. He had a far more stable temperament (now), he reminded Ning Ning more and more of a person—Chen Jun Yan.

But Ning Ning's attention was not on him, she was too preoccupied watching Ning Yu Ren. *Mama, what are you intending to do next? What kind of Princess Ling Shan will you show us?*

Ning Yu Ren slowly walked past the bookshelf. All of a sudden, she waved her hand and swept all the books off the bookshelf.

Chen Guan Chao furrowed his brows and took a look behind him, "What's going on?"

He put down his brush and walked towards the bookshelf, bent over and picked up the books on the floor one by one. His hand that was picking a book up froze abruptly, he slowly turned around and looked down.

A woman was lying on his table, to be more precise, a woman was lying on his drawing paper.

The woman casually shrugged her shoulders, she was slowly crawling on the drawing paper like a snake that was molting. Her movements were getting bigger by the minute, until she finally rolled off from the tiny table.

"...You!" Chen Guan Chao tightly gripped the book in his hand, looking quite nervous.

She quickly got up from the ground. Although she was standing up, her very long hair was still drooping from her face to the ground, slightly swaying like a weeping willow by the lake at night.

"You are..." Chen Guan Chao suddenly took a step towards her. Not only was he not afraid, morbid ecstasy was showing on his face instead. It was as if he had finally found the person he coveted after he had searched for her countless times in his dreams.

She slowly raised her hand and parted her hair to reveal a side of her face, then silently smiled at him.

The same movement, the same bearing, the same smile... Ning Ning had seen them before.

"Very scary, but very charismatic right?" Director Shi whispered to Ning Ning from her side, "The audience's attention would be captured with one look."

"Of course..." Ning Ning mumbled. This was the Phantom, Ning Yu

Ren was not acting as Princess Ling Shan at all. She had skillfully imitated the Phantom that Ning Ning had once acted as.

The scene finished shortly. Once it ended, Chen Guan Chao had a 180-degree change in attitude. He chased after Ning Yu Ren like a playboy, he stuttered a little out of excitement, "What, what is your name? Do you want to act in my movie after you are done with this one? Let me introduce myself, my name is Chen Guan Chao..."

Ning Yu Ren was shocked for a moment, then she silently lowered her head and walked to the Director's side. She asked him in a low voice, "Director, was that okay?"

"Yes, that was good." Director Shi turned over and asked Ning Ning, "Do you still want to try?"

Ning Ning felt bitter in her mouth.

She could also act as the Phantom. The problem was that Mama had already done it first, so no matter how she acted, it would look like she was just imitating Mama. She also asked herself, can she act better than Mama? She could not, because Mama had imitated her to a tee. She was acting as Ning Ning, how could Ning Ning surpass herself?

Director Shi was a good person, he patted Ning Ning on the shoulder and helped her save some dignity. "Let's quickly go for dinner, we'll stop here for today, we'll talk about the rest on another day."

"...Then I will make a move first." Ning Yu Ren said gloomily. Not only did she act like Ning Ning of the past, her habits outside of acting were also like Ning Ning of the past. Ning Ning felt a little suspicious as to whether Ning Yu Ren was currently sleeping in a coffin, eating cold meals, taking cold showers...

Director Shi patted Ning Ning's shoulder again. He was the first to leave, Ning Yu Ren was next, closely followed by a fanatical fanboy. "Consider it. I'm telling you, my <<Phantom of the Theater>>..."

Ning Ning stayed in the room alone feeling a little lost.

She had finally understood the meaning of *"don't get too close to the lead character..."*

To the movie theater, to the people in the movie, she was like a rock. This rock created a ripple when she was tossed in, firstly influencing the people around her, then influencing the people a little further away from her. She initially thought that she had only

influenced Wen Yu, but from the looks of things now, she had created a bigger influence than she had imagined.

The future, how would it change?

Ning Ning sighed. She turned around and discovered that someone was standing behind her.

He was leaning on the wall while smiling at her. Although he had not said a word, he was already flirting with her with his eyes. This person was the male lead of the current movie, Shi Zhong Tang.

Ning Ning did not know how long he had been there, she also did not know how long he had been watching. But to conform with the theory of *"the lead character is poisonous, stay away as much as possible"*, she smiled at him out of courtesy and attempted to walk out of the door.

In the end, he abruptly took a step to his side and bumped into her with his chest, then shouted in an exaggerated manner as he fell to the floor. He grabbed his head with one hand and said to her with a smile, "I fell down, I can only get up with a kiss."

...Traffic accident fraud3 your meowther4!!

"Wait here, I will get Director Shi over to give you CPR!" Ning Ning answered unfeelingly. Before she could take two steps, his lazy voice rang out from behind her, "If I was the male lead, I would not act like an idiot for that Princess Ling Shan from before."

Ning Ning was shocked, she turned over and looked at him.

He was still lying on the floor in a carefree manner, supporting his head with one hand and beckoned to her with the other.

Ning Ning hesitated for a while before making her way over reluctantly. She squatted down beside him and asked, "What do you mean?"

Shi Zhong Tang looked at her with a smile. He gently pointed to his cheek motioning for a kiss.

"I have no more questions, I am leaving." Ning Ning rolled her eyes and attempted to leave, but a hand suddenly reached out in front of her.

Shi Zhong Tang who had seemed lazy and drunk sat up agilely, his finger twirled a lock of Ning Ning's hair. He brought it to his lips and gave it a kiss. He looked good, his smile looked good, the way he smiled as he twirled her hair looked good. It had no hint of frivolity, it

looked like the smile of an understanding ancient knight instead. He told her, "Alright, I will teach you."

1This is a different Li(黎) compared to the ones we have met thus far(李).

2,4This is a Chinese way to swear in a less uncouth way, by replacing a part of the phrase with meow.

3She is referring to a fraud where scammers feign injury in traffic accidents in order to extort money from drivers.

TN: We have decided to release a bonus chapter this Sunday, we hope you guys look forward to it =).

Chapter 40

40: A Different Princess Ling Shan

"Ning Yu Ren has already portrayed the scary part to the extreme. It would be very difficult for you to surpass her in this aspect, so you need to act as a different Princess Ling Shan." Shi Zhong Tang smiled. "How about a Princess Ling Shan who portrays extreme beauty?"

It sounded reasonable, but when Ning Ning carefully thought about it...*Damn, isn't that a vase?*

"You really think this will work?" Ning Ning looked at him with doubt.

"But of course!" Shi Zhong Tang solemnly vowed, "If I were to draw the person I loved, I would definitely draw the most beautiful version of her in my mind. Why would I draw a female ghost to scare myself!"

It sounded reasonable, but upon listening to that last sentence... Ning Ning raised her eyebrow. "So you just want to look for a pretty girl to act with, not a female ghost..."

"Ning Cai Chen's meeting with Nie Xiao Qian¹ at the temple, Xiu Xian's meeting with White Snake at the broken bridge². What was the reason for neither of them to not shout demon and to not kill them on the spot? Wasn't it because both of them were beautiful like a dream, making people like them when they see them?" Shi Zhong Tang smiled. Ning Ning did not know when he had gotten so close to her.

He was so close to the extent that Ning Ning could smell him. It was not cologne, it was not soap either. It was an indescribable smell. It made one feel sensitive, made one's heart beat faster, made one want to run away yet could not bear to actually do it.

"...The type of girl I like..." He played with a lock of Ning Ning's hair, his voice in deep baritone. "Let me slowly tell you."

Ning Ning pushed him away then turned around and ran away.

Shi Zhong Tang didn't chase after her, he was laughing non-stop behind her.

Ning Ning felt angry from embarrassment. She felt that he was teasing her, to think that she was taking him seriously! He was purely trying to pick her up! She ran even faster, but stopped in her tracks as

she turned a corner. She retreated back behind the wall, quietly watching the two people in front of her.

As expected of mother and daughter! Mama was also pestered by a man! And it was a man who was even more horrible to look at!

"You should know me right?" Chen Guan Chao blocked Ning Yu Ren off not letting her go. "I am the scriptwriter and director of <<Phantom of the Theater>>."

Ning Yu Ren had no choice but to answer in a low voice, "...I know you."

Chen Guan Chao's eyes brightened. He adjusted the collar of his suit to make himself look more confident and successful.

"Although the movie had a very high box office and a lot of awards, personally, I'm not actually very satisfied with it." He looked at Ning Yu Ren with a fanatical gaze. "It can be even more perfect! It requires a perfect actress, a perfect Phantom...Yes, that person is you!"

Upon hearing this, Ning Yu Ren could not bear it any longer, she interrupted him by asking, "Do you remember me?"

Chen Guan Chao was momentarily stumped. He stared at Ning Yu Ren's face very seriously, but even after looking for a long time he was still confused. "Have we met?"

Ning Yu Ren clenched her fist unbearably, her voice was a little repressed. "Then do you remember Wen Xiao Ning?"

This time Chen Guan Chao finally recalled something, he gasped in surprise. "You actually know this name, this means you were once part of the cast of <<Phantom of the Theater>>? Hold on, I remember now..."

He started to smile, and closed two fingers together and waved them towards her in a dashing manner. "You acted as one of the followers of the female supporting role! I think your name was..."

"Enough!" Ning Yu Ren could not bear it any longer. She pushed him away, attempting to leave, but Chen Guan Chao would not let her. The two of them struggled with each other. Ning Ning took a deep breath and walked out of the corner.

"Hey, Chen Guan Chao." She lied with a serious face, "Director Shi called for you."

"Director Shi is looking for me?" Chen Guan Chao believed what Ning Ning said. He left Ning Yu Ren with a 'I will get back to you

later', then left to find Director Shi.

Once Chen Guan Chao left, Ning Ning immediately grabbed Ning Yu Ren's hand and winked at her. "Let's go, I was only tricking him."

The two of them left hurriedly. After they got to Ning Yu Ren's room, a sigh came from behind Ning Ning as she closed the door to the room.

"Actually, we met each other three years ago, but he could not recognise me." Ning Yu Ren muttered, "Because at that time, he only had eyes for a genius actress, he could not see anyone else at all."

Ning Ning turned back and looked at Ning Yu Ren in shock.

"What's funny is, he might be looking at me now, but that is because I am imitating that genius actress..." Ning Yu Ren suddenly raised her hand and covered her mouth, realising that she had just said something she shouldn't have.

She carefully looked towards Ning Ning, her expression looked a little pitiful and had traces of begging. Ning Ning felt a little heartbroken as she looked at Ning Yu Ren.

"You acted really well." Ning Ning said sincerely, "You acted *really* really well."

You portrayed the frightening aspect of the Phantom to the extreme, you portrayed 'Wen Xiao Ning' to the extreme, you had already forced a certain 'genius actress' to her wits' end. She could only put in effort on the vase path!

"Maybe I imitated her well enough." Ning Yu Ren was unaware. She mocked herself then lowered her head, covered her face powerlessly and said, "I don't have the talent to be an actress at all! I can only imitate others! I am only imitating her non-stop... but I will not be able to surpass her for the rest of my life..."

Ning Yu Ren started crying with her face covered as she said that.

To Ning Ning, looking at Ning Yu Ren now was like looking at her past self. Continuously watching Mama's movies, continuously imitating her and continuously failing. Slowly, she was labelled 'talentless', 'not as good as Ning Yu Ren', 'guaranteed not to last long'.

What was scary was that others thought that way, it was that she herself also slowly started to think that way.

Ning Ning walked over frantically, she reached out to hug Ning Yu Ren. Ning Yu Ren seemed to be shocked by this sudden display of

affection, her body froze. She pushed Ning Ning away.

Ning Ning later used the momentum of being pushed away to turn her body, facing Ning Yu Ren with her back so that Ning Yu Ren could not see her slightly reddened eyes. Ning Ning asked Ning Yu Ren with a slightly husky voice, "What do you plan on doing in the future? Continue to imitate that genius actress?"

"..." Ning Yu Ren fell silent for a while, then said, "What else can I do?"

"But if you only imitate her, you can only act in one type of role." Ning Ning pretended to look outside the window, but her eyes kept turning towards Ning Yu Ren, "You can imitate others..."

"Easy for you to say!" Ning Yu Ren shouted. Her long hair hung loosely, she bit her thumb and murmured, "You don't understand, you don't understand at all! The more I imitate her, the more I cannot leave her... It's like,...like she had come back to life. Always by my side, speaking to me by my ears, I am becoming more and more like her..."

Ning Ning turned her head around frantically. Looking at the state Ning Yu Ren was in at that moment, Ning Ning's eyes were full of anxiety and worry.

"You are too deep into the character." Ning Ning sternly said, "It's very dangerous to continue like this..."

Ning Yu Ren bit her lip and did not say a word. She struggled and hesitated. She was afraid but could not bear to give up...

"Let's swap roles." Ning Ning sighed, "You can act as Yan Hong Xiu, I will act as Princess Ling Shan. Let me tell you, the role of Yan Hong Xiu..."

Before Ning Ning could finish, Ning Yu Ren turned over and smiled at her. "Finally revealing your true intentions?"

Ning Ning was stunned.

"Only fear and pain can be etched deeply into people's mind! My Princess Ling Shan is better than yours!" Ning Yu Ren started smiling gloomily and coldly. It was the Phantom's type of smile. Not believing in anyone, not trusting anyone. "Leave! This role is mine, I will never let you have it!"

Ning Ning was chased out of the door.

Ning Ning leaned on the door. She slowly looked up to the sky and

murmured, "Only fear and pain can be etched deeply into people's minds?"

There was silence behind her, she did not know if Mama heard what she said.

"Fear and pain, I have experienced those too." No matter if Ning Yu Ren was listening or not, Ning Ning was determined to finish her sentence. "They really etched themselves in my mind...like a razor, or a bowl of dumpling."

The candlelight flickered. Boss Qu laid on a chair. She was shaving him from his side, he looked at her gently.

Light shone in, Wen Yu quietly squatted outside the wardrobe. He handed over a spoon of hot dumpling over to her.

"...I want to act as Princess Ling Shan." Ning Ning said, "A Princess Ling Shan who is not as frightening, not as in pain."

Ning Ning made her way to leave. The door behind her was locked. Ning Yu Ren was leaning on the door with her back, listening to Ning Ning's footsteps recede. After a long time she said in a deep voice, "You cannot beat me."

Could beauty surpass ugliness? A Princess Ling Shan who was not as frightening, not as in pain, could that surpass a Princess Ling Shan who was extremely scary and in pain?

Ning Ning did not know.

She just wanted Mama to watch her act that Princess Ling Shan out.

So Ning Ning returned to the study that was used for the rehearsal earlier in the day. Shi Zhong Tang was no longer inside, this made her breathe a sigh of relief. She walked in and reached out to pick up the script she had left behind.

"I want to act as a different Princess Ling Shan." She told herself, "A beautiful and moving Princess Ling Shan."

There was not much time left for her, mainly because the rest of the actors would arrive within the next three days, then production would begin. She had to create a different Princess Ling Shan within this period of time.

But what kind of image should she specifically create?

This completely depended on the ability of the actor.

Ning Ning flipped through the script. It was different from the

novel, it was even a little dry. There was not much description on the scenes nor the psychology, it was basically a book of lines.

The same line could be paired with countless types of expressions and gestures. Which type would be the best, there would not be notes on it, she would only know by acting them out.

For example this line: Come here.

"Come here." Ning Ning furrowed her eyebrows in anger, then shook her head, "I'm not collecting a debt."

"Come here." Ning Ning had a coquettish look, she bit her lip lightly, then softly made a sound of disgust, "...*Come play, Master* almost rolled off my tongue."

"Come here." Ning Ning said nonchalantly. She paused, feeling like she had captured some of the feeling. She held the script in her hand and paced around the house. She repeated the previous sentence a few more times, it was like she had finally found a hint of the secret to success...

She flipped the pages of the script and switched to another sentence. At the start of the film, Princess Ling Shan was dragged onto the execution ground. The treacherous official gave her another chance because of her good looks. He asked if she was willing to enter his harem.

"I, the dignified Princess Ling Shan, will not condescend myself to serve thieves." Ning Ning said in a faint voice, as if she was a noble who looked down on this usurper. "Kill me if you want."

The voice of a man rang out in exasperation from outside the door, "Ungrateful!"

Ning Ning was surprised. She glanced towards the voice and saw Shi Zhong Tang at the doorway under the setting sun. He turned his face towards her and smiled. "Go on."

...Although she did not know what reason he had for helping her, having someone to act with was a good thing. Ning Ning paused for a moment. With the book in one hand, the other hand behind her back, even though she was on the execution grounds about to receive the sentence by the axe, she still did not panic. She did not cry nor beg, proud and unyielding, elegant and noble. She closed her eyes and said, "Do it."

Shi Zhong Tang switched from the treacherous official to the executioner behind her. He breathed heavily twice, before he finally

resolutely said, "I have parents and children at home, I simply dare not go against the new Emperor. Princess, forgive me!"

A few seconds later, he switched from acting out the executioner to the male lead. His voice was calm, but if you listened carefully, you would discover that huge rage and grief were bubbling under that calmness. He said in a low voice, "A thousand silvers are in the carriage behind me, where is her hair?"

As they continued acting, Ning Ning had only these words in her mind—*He's so good!*

She already felt that it was difficult to act out one character, but he took on every other character that was not hers. He switched between characters extremely quickly, but still managed to act extremely well. He was not even holding a script, he couldn't have memorised every line of every character right?

He was obviously a genius, but still worked so hard, he really made things hard for ordinary people.

"Don't get distracted." Shi Zhong Tang interrupted her train of thought and smiled. "Go on."

Next, it was the scene from this morning.

Ning Ning walked to the side of the table. She bent down and picked up a drawing paper from the floor and placed it on the table, then climbed onto it. Next, she had to portray (Princess Ling Shan) walking out of the painting.

Mama chose to slowly crawl out like a molting snake. Although it looked scary, it was very eye-catching. What could she do so that she could be even more eye-catching?

"No, don't dwell on this." Ning Ning closed her eyes. "What I want to act out now is my own Princess Ling Shan."

Ning Ning gradually loosened her body and loosened her thoughts. The study gradually became a mausoleum, the old and broken down bookshelf became a pavilion full of ancient treasures, famous paintings hung on the bare walls, even the table below her became red sandalwood flooring, her dress and palace waistband fell onto the floor.

How did she end up on a table?

Ning Ning slowly opened her eyes. She frowned out of awkwardness. Being of royal descent, she did not know how to climb onto a table. Now that she was on one, she did not know how to get

down. She turned her head slightly and looked at Shi Zhong Tang who was leaning on the door. She raised her hand and ordered him like it was the natural thing to do, "Come here."

Shi Zhong Tang was mildly shocked. He smiled and got away from the door. He walked up to her. However, he did not help her up by holding her hand. He held her in a princess carry instead and asked her with tender affection, "How would you like to thank me?"

Not only did Ning Ning not thank him, she pushed his arms away. Once her feet landed on the floor, she immediately walked out of the door. It was not because she really did not care about him at all. A beam of moonlight illuminated her body, she turned her head slowly under the moonlight. She opened the script in front of her face like a fan, revealing only a pair of sparkling eyes gazing at him, then slightly blinked and elegantly bowed a little to him.

The scene was like a dream and fantasy, like the moon in the water, a flower in the mirror.

Shi Zhong Tang stared at Ning Ning blankly for a moment. He suddenly smiled. He followed his heart and reached out his hand to pull her into his arms, like holding the moon in his hands, like getting the scent of flowers on him. He leaned down and planted a kiss on the corner of her lips with a smile.

Slap!

The next day, the room was buzzing with noise. A group of people were bickering with each other. One of them turned over and looked towards Shi Zhong Tang and exclaimed in surprise, "What happened to your face?"

"Nothing much." Shi Zhong Tang touched his right cheek, "There was a mosquito last night."

At the end of the discussion, Director Shi looked at Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren who were standing in the midst of everyone and said, "The one who will act as Princess Ling Shan is..."

1These are popular characters in various Chinese fictional works, where is a female ghost who eventually has a romantic relationship with Ning Cai Chen.

2Similarly, these are characters from another Chinese story, , where a man falls in love with a supernatural being.

Chapter 41

41: First Confession

"Is of course Ning Yu Ren!"

Director Chen turned over and looked, written on his face was: "This great director has yet finished talking, who interrupted me?"

It was Chen Guan Chao.

"Although You Ling's Princess Ling Shan is beautiful, it lacks impact. There are too many of these types of characters on the market!" Chen Guan Chao gestured towards Ning Yu Ren's direction. "Unlike her. She portrays a female character in a way that has never been done before. Full of subversion, deadly and bewitching!"

After hearing those words, the crowd who had just fallen silent erupted in a new wave of argument.

As a victorious smile emerged on Chen Guan Chao's face, a voice lazily rang out from the crowd.

"Indeed, she has acted very well. It was so good that the entire movie has lost its balance."

Chen Guan Chao was shocked. He looked towards the voice and saw Shi Zhong Tang touching his chin and smiling. "All everyone cared about was who was better. Did everyone forget the main story of <<The Person Within the Painting>>? What is the most important detail? It was that the male lead was so overly smitten by the person within the painting that his father had no choice but to get the supporting female character to seduce him. Now, look at her again."

Everyone's gaze fell upon Ning Yu Ren.

An actress who was dreary, it was like if she stood in a place long enough, the place would start to sprout mushrooms. Chen Guan Chao said she was deadly and bewitching. The bewitching part is up for discussion, but everyone agreed on the deadly part. Very few people looked into her eyes, they were afraid that if they looked too long they would unbearably take out prayer beads or a cross...

"A Princess Ling Shan that will make the film come with a 'Parental Guidance' label, how do you expect the male lead character to fall in

love at first sight with her?" Shi Zhong Tang shrugged. "How do you expect the supporting female character to even utter the line 'She is too beautiful, I cannot even compare to one of her fingernails'?"

"Wouldn't you be able to better present the affection of the male lead this way?" Upon seeing the crowd debating over the fact as if they were about to be convinced by Shi Zhong Tang, Chen Guan Chao refused to back down. "Wouldn't it be more moving if the male lead loved her despite her being ugly and scary?"

Shi Zhong Tang tilted his head and smiled at Chen Guan Chao.

Just when Chen Guan Chao thought he was rendered speechless, Shi Zhong Tang spat out four words, "<<Phantom of the Theater>>."

Chen Guan Chao was mildly taken aback.

"When I looked at the script before, I felt that there was something odd. I didn't know why, a lot of it gave me a sense of déjà vu." Shi Zhong Tang looked at him, "Now that I've listened to you, I finally can confirm where I've seen it—<<Phantom of the Theater>>."

"What do you mean by that?" Director Shi suddenly said.

"I only feel that this movie is beginning to look like another movie, whether it's the plot or the character design." Shi Zhong Tang shook the script in his hand. "Especially the amendments you've made recently."

The content of a script was not immutable, it could be amended in a logical manner according to the needs of the cast and crew.

But it was very obvious that the amendments Chen Guan Chao made had already slowly gone outside the realm of being logical...

"A mysterious, frightening female lead character who is willing to kill anyone for the sake of the male lead character." Shi Zhong Tang parted the crowd and walked towards Chen Guan Chao step by step. "A horror love story that happened in the old home of the Li family."

He reached out in front of Chen Guan Chao with script in hand.

"I would like to ask you, are you really writing <<The Person within the Painting>>?" Shi Zhong Tang looked at Chen Guan Chao deeply. "Is she really acting as Princess Ling Shan?"

Chen Guan Chao stared at Shi Zhong Tang blankly. He wanted to explain himself, but he could not.

Because if any explanations were to be put in front of the truth—in

front of the script—they would be found wanting.

He had already unwittingly rewritten <<The Person within the Painting>> into an ancient version of <<Phantom of the Theater>>.

"Enough." Director Shi slapped the armrest of his chair with his right hand, breaking the silence. "I will now announce that the role of Princess Ling Shan will go to You Ling. As for the role of Yan Hong Xiu..."

"I propose that it goes to Ning Yu Ren."

Director Shi looked at the direction where the voice was coming from, written on his face was "Who else interrupted me again?"

It was Ning Ning.

"I propose that Ning Yu Ren gets the role of Yan Hong Xiu." Ning Ning said as she gazed at Ning Yu Ren in the corner. "She is the best candidate."

After the meeting, Shi Zhong Tang caught up with Ning Ning before she could take two steps and walked abreast of her.

"How was it?" He winked at her with his right eye. "Was I very dashing just now?"

Ning Ning looked at him with a complicated expression. She could not deny that he was dashing this time. He did try to pick her up, but that was not his only objective. If he had not said what he just said, this movie might have turned into 'Phantom of the Theater' in an ancient setting. Even if Director Shi realised something was not right in the middle of the shoot, it would already have been a huge waste of resources.

"Actually he is quite pitiable." Shi Zhong Tang suddenly said as he looked forward.

Following his gaze, Ning Ning saw the back of Chen Guan Chao. He was in a completely different spirit as compared to before, he looked very depressed and restless, scratching his head as if there was no one around him, his hair quickly turned into a bird's nest with all the scratching...

"<<Phantom of the Theater>> made him famous while he was young. By the looks of it now, it doesn't seem like it was a good thing." Shi Zhong Tang's eyes brightened. "He is trapped by his past success. He has been continuously repeating himself these years, writing the same thing over and over, everything he wrote turned into

< <Phantom of the Theater> >."

He suddenly turned around as he shed the serious look on his face, the cynical smile was back on again. "Alright, let's not talk about him. Want to have dinner with me? I know a place that's not bad."

"...Next time." Ning Ning quickly looked around her surroundings. Ning Yu Ren was nowhere to be seen, she had probably returned to her room. "I want to talk to Ning Yu Ren."

"Wow! You really are a little devil!" Shi Zhong Tang pretended to be surprised. "She has already been demoted to be the supporting character, yet you still aren't willing to let her off?"

"What are you talking about!" Ning Ning rolled her eyes. "What is wrong with the role of Yan Hong Xiu! She is the true essence of the movie!"

Shi Zhong Tang was taken aback for a while, then smiled and looked at her. When someone looked at you this way, you wouldn't bear to let him wait too long and continue what you were saying.

"...Chen Guan Chao was right about one thing. The character design for Princess Ling Shan is very ordinary." Ning Ning said, "The limitation set upon an actor when presented with such a character design is very big. It cannot be compared to Yan Hong Xiu's character design which is down-to earth and full of explosiveness."

The character design for Princess Ling Shan was too lofty and unrelatable. Although she was the female lead character for < <The Person within the Painting> >, but by the looks of the plot and her lines, the scriptwriter did not put much thought on her. Her main responsibility was beauty! Beauty! Beauty!

But Yan Hong Xiu was different. Although she was also a beautiful girl, she was closer to everyone in the real world. From an ordinary birth, she had lived a tough life. No matter what she wanted, she had to fight for them with her two hands. Fate had never been kind to her, she could only rely on herself. If this character was to be portrayed well, it would be very moving.

"... Since you see it this way, why did you switch roles with her?" Shi Zhong Tang asked with a smile.

"As I said." Ning Ning sighed once again and gazed towards Ning Yu Ren's direction, "She is the best candidate."

After Ning Ning went to look for Ning Yu Ren, Shi Zhong Tang stood at the same spot for a moment, a voice that made him languish

rang out from behind him.

"Shi Tou1!" Director Shi walked towards Shi Zhong Tang with his three thick layers of beer belly. Although he tried very hard to express his anger, he was born with a Buddha face that could not scare anyone. "You are trying to hook up with girls again!"

"I'm not!" Shi Zhong Tang stoutly denied.

"You dare to deny it?" His father exercised his privilege and pinched Shi Zhong Tang's ear firmly. "I wrote poems for five years to woo her, copying poems from the Han dynasty to Tagore, forcibly becoming an intellectual from a poser, what about you!"

"Don't pretend to be an intellectual when you are actually a poser. Mom told me, she almost called the police because the first poem you ever wrote to her was: 'He fell head over heels, when Bi Yu became a woman'..." Shi Zhong Tang could not even finish his sentence before Director Shi pinched his other ear when his embarrassment turned into anger.

Director Shi felt a lot more relaxed after he taught his son a lesson, he had vented all the resentment from getting continuously interrupted. He put his arm around his son's shoulders and told him sincerely, "You could only be prodigal when you are young, no one would label you as prodigal when you get older, you would just be an old punk. Tell Dad, what kind of girl can make you settle down?"

"Someone with the looks of Xi Shi, the talents of Ban Zhao, the body of Zhao Fei Yan, a smile as beautiful as Audrey Hepburn..." Shi Zhong Tang counted his fingers one by one. As Director Shi was about to lose control of his emotions, Shi Zhong Tang retracted his fingers except for one and wagged it. He smiled and said, "None of the above examples is my girlfriend."

Director Shi got angry, "What exactly do you want?"

"No rush, no rush." Shi Zhong Tang avoided the hand that was approaching him and ran away with a smile. "To make it short, if I really want to look for one, I will look for a girl who is stubborn but kind."

"Little rascal! Stop right there!" Director Shi chased after him madly, but the air resistance against the beer belly was simply too strong...Ten minutes later, Shi Zhong Tang stopped and turned around, there was no one behind him. He breathed a sigh of relief since he had finally shaken Director Shi off. He looked at his surroundings again. What a coincidence, he saw two familiar faces.

In the courtyard, Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren did not notice someone approaching, or you could say, the atmosphere between the two of them was too tense, they could only see each other and no one else.

"Princess Ling Shan is already yours." Ning Yu Ren's eyes were slightly red, she looked like she had just cried. "What more do you want!"

"I am here to discuss the role of Yan Hong Xiu with you." Ning Ning told her, "This role might be a little different from your expectations..."

Ning Yu Ren interrupted her with a scream.

"Enough!! Stop being a hypocrite!!" Ning Yu Ren covered her ears with both hands like she didn't want to listen anymore. She was also unwilling to believe anything Ning Ning had to say.

She looked at Ning Ning with her reddish eyes, with jealousy and sadness, with envy and hatred.

"Why is Heaven so unfair." Ning Yu Ren mumbled, "You have everything. The daughter of a banker, you are young and pretty, your whole family supports you in your acting career, you get everything you want, you get to act as anything you want."

She slowly lowered her head, looking at the letter in her hand and said acrimoniously, "What about me?"

Ning Ning followed the direction of her vision, "...That is?"

"The letter my mom wrote to me. She said I am not getting any younger while I'm out here, but I have yet to achieve anything, I might as well go home and get married...You've got to be kidding me!!" Ning Yu Ren clenched her right hand and crushed the letter in her palm, her voice was very agitated, "After all the trouble of escaping from her, I would rather die than to go back! I would rather die than to become someone like her!!"

Finally she resolved herself not because of what Ning Ning said, but because of the letter.

"...I'm not even afraid of death." Ning Yu Ren slowly raised her head. "Why would I be afraid of you?"

The once lifeless eyes were now burning with flames.

"...I want to act as Yan Hong Xiu." Ning Yu Ren stared at Ning Ning as she said, "If Yan Hong Xiu can beat Princess Ling Shan, so can I! I

will act better than you, I will be more popular than you, I will fight for everything I don't have!"

Ning Ning originally had a lot of things to say to Ning Yu Ren, but at this moment she did not want to say anything.

Why would she?

Ning Yu Ren finally had the eyes of Yan Hong Xiu.

"I will wait for you." Finally, Ning Ning smiled at her. "Continue chasing after me."

Mama, don't stop, don't be trapped in the shadow of Wen Xiao Ning. Come out of the cage, continue running forward.

Once you start running, you will quickly run past me. When you turn back once again, you will realise that the people who once troubled you were not that good.

Because she was but a pitiful person who had been trapped in your shadow for many years, continuously chasing after you.

Ning Yu Ren was flushed, she mistook Ning Ning's smile as one of a mocking nature. She unbearably walked up and gave Ning Ning a push. "Leave! Get out! I don't want to see you again!"

Ning Ning took two steps back, then quickly turned around so that Ning Yu Ren would not see her tearful eyes.

Even if she knew that this was for Mama's own good, she could not help but cry when she was hated and loathed this way by the person she liked the most.

Once Mama returned to her room and the door was shut, Ning Ning let her tears flow.

Clapping sound rang out from beside her.

Ning Ning took a look at the other party, then walked towards him and shushed him. She asked him quietly, "Why are you here?"

Shi Zhong Tang looked at her with two bright eyes. "That was pretty good acting."

Once he said that, he wiped her tears.

"... But why did you do that?" He looked down at the tear on his fingertip, as if he was looking at a pretty butterfly. "This doesn't do you any good."

"It does." Ning Ning said, "If she acts well, this movie will sell better

right?"

"What I mean to say is that..." Shi Zhong Tang smiled as he looked up, "This, doesn't, do, you, any, good."

Ning Ning fell silent.

It was too difficult to explain her actions. Why would she treat another actress whom she barely knew this well, especially when it was an actress she did not know how to deal with?

After hesitating for a long time, she looked up at him and said in a serious manner, "She will become the best actress once she gets past this obstacle."

"You don't know whether she will become the best actress." Shi Zhong Tang was not smiling anymore, he looked at her seriously. "But you definitely could be the world's most blissful woman."

Ning Ning was stunned.

"I like you." Shi Zhong Tang loosened his expression, sunlight shone through the flower and leaves of the tree canopy beside him, sprinkled on him between his brows, as if they were golden snow. He looked at her gently and seriously. "Give me a chance, let me dote on you and make you the world's most blissful woman."

Ning Ning, "...Huh?"

1990 April 15th, the first confession (she ever got) in her life.

There were still three months before Ning Yu Ren got her first movie ticket.

Chapter 42

42: Getting Closer

...But before July 7th could arrive, Ning Yu Ren got into a big trouble...

"What?" Ning Ning said with surprise, "She was arrested? Why?"

Shi Zhong Tang put a finger to his lips and shushed her, then said in a low voice, "Don't let anyone else hear this...she is at the police station along with a group of prostitutes."

The information was not made public because Shi Zhong Tang was the first to receive it. He was usually easygoing, but once he started to move he would move very quickly. He would immediately attract the attention of every entertainment reporter within an extremely short time the moment he took off his sunglasses on the street.

By the time the reporters turned back to search for Ning Yu Ren again, they would find out that she had been bailed out. Even when they tried to buy a little information, the relevant people would not say anything, they were obviously bought off.

"You owe me one." Shi Zhong Tang moved closer to Ning Ning's ear and smiled as he told her the name of a cafe.

Moonlight Cafe, 7pm.

The place was not far away from the crew, plus it was quiet and secluded, actors would frequently eat here.

Ning Ning rushed over and looked around, she quickly entered the cafe then knocked on a coffee table with a checkered table cloth laid over it.

Ning Yu Ren slowly looked up from behind the table, she looked very gaunt.

Ning Ning sat across from her. She looked at the coffee cup in front of Ning Yu Ren that had already turned cold. She turned over and called for the waiter and ordered two new cups of coffee. She turned back and said, "What exactly happened to you?"

"...I didn't do anything bad." Ning Yu Ren said softly, "I only... I could not portray the seduction scene well. I only wanted to see... how

those prostitutes do it."

Ning Ning answered with silence.

"If I don't do this, I really wouldn't know how to continue acting." Ning Yu Ren waved her hands around, looking a little lost. "Director Shi told me not to imitate others anymore, especially not famous female stars like Bai Rong, Chi Xue Li... If I am not allowed to imitate them, who else can I imitate?"

Ning Yu Ren had been scolded very badly by Director Shi in this period of time because she had subconsciously imitated current popular stars while she acted. She imitated them too realistically, she would even imitate the small gestures which the original person probably would not have noticed themselves. If you did not look closely, you would have thought you were looking at the popular stars themselves.

But this was the cast for <<The Person Within the Painting>>, not an imitation show.

"I...I don't think I can create something out of nothing." Ning Yu Ren pressed her eyes with a paper napkin, her eyeliner had been smudged long ago, the areas around her eyes were black. "I cannot act as someone whom I have not seen before."

Ning Ning looked at her with complicated feelings. She initially thought Mama could achieve a breakthrough if she had similar feelings with the character in the movie, just like what Ning Ning went through...

This way, Mama would not need a movie ticket...

"...Is there a place in this world where I can interact with more people?" Ning Yu Ren seemed to have forgotten about Ning Ning's existence, she said to herself, "I really want to go to a place that has ancient people, republic people, princesses and slave girls. A place with a lot of people, ideally people that do not exist in reality...so I can imitate all of them..."

Ning Ning opened her mouth, but she did not know what to tell Ning Yu Ren. She inadvertently took a glimpse behind Ning Yu Ren, forgetting to speak momentarily.

There was a window behind Ning Yu Ren, it was closed because it was slightly cold on that day. There was a shadow at the bottom right corner of the window. Ning Ning initially thought that the window was dirty, but upon closer inspection she realised that it was a mask.

A smiling mask was looking at them through the window.

Clank. The coffee cup was tipped over, the brown of the coffee quickly seeping into the entire table. Ning Yu Ren exclaimed in surprise and stood up along with Ning Ning.

The waiter quickly came over and cleaned things up. After the confusion, Ning Ning looked at the window again and realised that the mask was not there anymore.

"Was I seeing things?" Ning Ning stared at the window, fear lingered in her heart.

The two of them left the cafe afterwards and returned to where they live. Everyone thought they were returning from a meal when they saw the two of them as the information of what happened with Ning Yu Ren was not announced. Director Shi even made a joke as he slapped his beer belly, "You guys only just came back from your meal? Don't get fat and cause yourself to not fit into the costume tomorrow."

"We won't, we won't." Ning Ning answered with a smile. Ning Yu Ren who was behind her did not dare say a word.

The two of them walked up the stairs one after another as both of them lived on the same floor. They walked one after another in the long hallway.

Ning Yu Ren lived in the middle whilst Ning Ning lived at the end of the hallway. As such, Ning Yu Ren arrived at her room first. She opened the door and hesitated before she said in Ning Ning's direction, "Good night."

Ning Ning smiled and turned back, but the words '*good night*' were stuck in her throat.

A smiling mask emerged from behind the wall in the direction from which they came, quietly looking at them.

"...What is it?" Ning Yu Ren was getting chills from Ning Ning's expression, she quickly turned back and took a look only to see that nothing was behind her. She breathed a sigh of relief then turned and said to Ning Ning, "I'm returning to my room."

"Oh...oh..." Ning Ning answered. Truthfully, her brain was blank, she didn't even know what she was saying. She came back to her senses when she heard the sound of the closing door, leaving her alone in the hallway. She frantically rushed back to her room.

Ning Ning could not sleep well at night. Once she closed her eyes, she felt a mask appear beside her, thus she did not dare to open her

eyes. It was not until daybreak when she finally opened her eyes with fear, before breathing a sigh of relief.

"What's wrong?" Shi Zhong Tang touched her face while they were having a break after a scene, he said worriedly, "You looked a little frail."

"...I didn't sleep well last night." Ning Ning hesitated, she did not know whether to tell him the truth.

"Then do you want me to accompany you?" Shi Zhong Tang smiled, "Actually, acting is just my side gig, I'm actually an expert in singing lullabies."

Ning Ning rolled her eyes at him.

At this moment, a commotion rang out beside them, someone shouted, "Get him!"

The two of them looked towards the noise. They saw a tree being violently shaken by a security guard that leaves were falling from it while a reporter with a camera around his neck was clinging on to the tree for his dear life.

"Wow, that's remarkable." Shi Zhong Tang touched his chin, looking at the reporter who was clamouring for the security to go up and get him. "This reporter is not bad, he has a lot of guts."

Just when he thought he was safe, a security guard brought a chainsaw over and threatened to saw the tree. It was only then that the person on the tree came down unwillingly and handed over the photos and film.

"Let me have a look." Shi Zhong Tang grabbed the prize of victory and shared it with Ning Ning.

He was the biggest deal out of all the actors, so the photos were mostly of him. Ning Ning also suspected that this person was a fan of Shi Zhong Tang. He shot Shi Zhong Tang with good lighting and effects, but the other photos were taken candidly...

Ning Ning suddenly felt stunned as she stared at the photo in front of her.

"What is it?" Shi Zhong Tang moved closer to take a look, a corner of his mouth curved slightly upwards. "Not bad, this couple's photo was taken quite well, I'll mount it up later."

The photo was taken from an upwards angle. It was taken the moment Shi Zhong Tang touched Ning Ning's face, the leaves were

colourful, the beauty was looking down, the scene looked like it came out of a poem or a painting...but that was not the point.

"Look at this." Ning Ning asked while pointing at the corner of the photo, "Do you know this person?"

The corner of the photo included the nearby crew members. It included Director Shi who was drinking water, Ning Yu Ren who was getting her makeup touched up, a makeup artist who was bending over to pick up an eyebrow pencil, and...a person wearing a mask.

"Hmm?" Shi Zhong Tang frowned. He stared at the masked man for a while, then took the photo out of Ning Ning's hands and said, "Let me have this for a bit."

He brought the photo to Director Shi. She could not make out what they were saying, but the security guards started to get busy again. Unfortunately, their venture this time bore no fruits. The masked man in the photo seemed to have vanished, they could not find anything.

"This might be a prank by someone from the crew." Shi Zhong Tang returned with the photo and shrugged. "This was probably taken from the props."

Ning Ning took the photo from him knowing that it was not a prank. Although the figure and the mask in the photo were blurry, she was certain because she had seen it twice before.

It was a smiling mask.

Because of the false alarm that day, Director Shi specially invited everyone out for a meal after the shoot was done. Initially, everyone was happy about it, but they found out later that they were really required to slim down, so everyone was staring at a table full of vegetables.

After they left the place, quite a lot of them ran towards a roadside stall waving their money while ordering, "Three sticks of barbecued meat."

Ning Ning looked around and found that Ning Yu Ren was also sitting in a shop, digging into a bowl of millet congee. She stepped into the shop as well. The shopkeeper placed a cup of water in front of her. She thanked the shopkeeper then took the photo out from her pocket, placed it on the table and passed it to Ning Yu Ren.

Ning Yu Ren stopped eating. She grabbed the photo and took a look then looked back at Ning Ning doubtfully.

"Do you have any impression of him?" Ning Ning asked.

Ning Yu Ren shook her head.

"He had already appeared a few times." Ning Ning said, "The first time was at the cafe, he was looking at us through the window. The second time, he was peeking out at us in the hallway. The third time..."

She suddenly paused, sweat was rolling down her forehead.

The first time was outside the window, the second time was at the hallway, the third time was by her side...

Wouldn't one say that the distance between the mask and the two of them was getting smaller?

Across the table, Ning Yu Ren's eyes were slowly widening as she stared at the photo.

Ning Ning looked down at the cup filled with warm water in front of her.

Reflected on the water, was a smiling mask.

He was already behind her.

Chapter 43

43: No Other Choice

How could you see the reflection of the person behind you from a cup?

It was very simple.

He was bending over looking at you.

Ning Ning quickly pushed the table away and escaped to the side.

The person behind her did not run, he was still standing on the same spot, smiling at Ning Ning while looking at her sideways.

...Inconceivable, how did she know that he was smiling from behind the mask? She pulled herself together and questioned the other party, "...Who are you?"

The man was wearing a smiling mask along with white prison uniform. His neck was dyed in a circle of red, like a blood trail from decapitation.

He fixed his gaze on Ning Ning. Ning Ning didn't know what he saw on her, but he smiled even more happily and raised his hand towards her, "For you."

In his palm was a crumpled movie ticket.

This felt like a déjà vu. Ning Ning had once rejected this offer, she could not agree to it this time as well, she quickly shook her head.

Ning Ning grabbed Ning Yu Ren's arm, went around the Masked Man and ran out of the door.

Once they stepped outside, they were encapsulated in a hubbub of voices. A lot of the crew were outside of the shop, people were having kebabs and drinking beers. Shi Zhong Tang walked towards them with kebabs in each hand. He spread his arms out like a peacock and smiled, "Afraid of getting fat?"

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of him. She turned back and took a look, the Masked Man was no longer behind her.

"...I'm not." She turned back. For the sake of calming her nerves, she reached out for one of the kebabs in his hands.

Shi Zhong Tang ended up raising the kebab high in the air, he also waved it at her cheaply, "I am, I have to give you a piggyback ride up to the top of the building in tomorrow's scene!"

...Don't offer it to me if you won't let me have it!!

Afterwards, Ning Ning returned to the hotel with most of the people. She suddenly heard the sound of someone knocking from the outside as she closed the door.

"Who is it?" Ning Ning turned back.

"It's me." It was Shi Zhong Tang's voice.

"Is there something else you want from me?" Ning Ning returned to the door. She reflexively attempted to look at the peephole, but peepholes were not yet a common feature in this time period. Only a small amount of the wealthy houses had it installed, some hotels didn't even have such facilities.

"I forgot to give you something." Shi Zhong Tang laughed. "Open the door please."

"What is it?" Ning Ning asked.

"You'll find out when you open the door." Shi Zhong Tang replied.

It should be a love letter or a rose...

Ning Ning was even more unwilling to open the door now. She had rejected his confession previously, things between them were already a little awkward. Truthfully, she was not good at rejecting people, especially when a person was expressing goodwill. Every rejection was a kind of torment to her.

"It's alright, it's late now." She could not think of a better solution for now, so she could only evade the topic. "Give it to me tomorrow."

Silence followed. Suddenly, Ning Yu Ren's voice rang out, "Oh, what are you doing here."

Shi Zhong Tang answered, "I'm looking for someone."

Ning Yu Ren stated, "What a coincidence, I am looking for someone too."

A few more knocks rang out.

Ning Yu Ren said, "Open up, I have something to ask you."

Ning Ning guessed that Ning Yu Ren wanted to ask about the Masked Man. She hesitated before opening the door and said, "Come

in..."

Her voice was stuck in her throat.

Outside of the door was not Shi Zhong Tang nor Ning Yu Ren.

There was only a man wearing a smiling mask.

"You finally opened the door." He initially used Ning Yu Ren's voice, then he switched to Shi Zhong Tang's voice. He smiled as he reached out with ticket in hand. "Here, for you, please take it."

Ning Ning wanted to quickly close the door, but the Masked Man raised his arm and blocked it.

"Take it!" He tried very hard to force himself into the room. He pushed the door with one hand and reached into the room with another, the ticket in his hand was almost on Ning Ning's face. "You have already changed the fate of another person, why can't you change mine? Take pity on me! Take it! Take it!"

Once he became agitated, the smile on his mask became more vivid. It was not a sincere smile, but a professional shallow smile that salesmen and con artists used.

"Help me! Help me!" Ning Ning could not help but start shouting.

The sound of a door opening and footsteps came from the outside, they were accompanied by the angry roar of Shi Zhong Tang, "What are you doing?"

The Masked Man turned and took a look then immediately tried to escape.

Shi Zhong Tang chased after him in slippers, shouting as he chased him, "Underwear thief! Everyone, get him!"

The Masked Man who was maligned by Shi Zhong Tang stumbled for a moment, then started to run even faster.

The hallway was in chaos, doors were opening one after another, there were endless footsteps, the shouts were getting louder. Shi Zhong Tang returned after a while, the slipper on his left foot was gone. He was a little out of breath but he had no time to tend to himself. He first helped Ning Ning who was sitting on the ground to her bed.

Then he asked her with concern, "Are you alright? Do you want a kebab to calm your nerves?"

Ning Ning stayed silent for a while and looked at him. "You're not

scared? You have to piggyback me up to the top floor tomorrow."

"You're still holding on to that?" Shi Zhong Tang smiled. "I was joking with you, when you give the girl you like a piggyback ride, who would care whether she is fat on that day?"

Director Shi was very angry because of this incident, he had a big argument with the management of the hotel. The hotel was forced to tighten the security for a few days, every stranger coming in and out of the hotel had to go through a thorough background check. This seemed to be effective as things seemed to be peaceful for the next few days, the Masked Man did not appear in front of Ning Ning again.

But the unrest within Ning Ning did not decrease.

She had the nagging feeling that she had forgotten something.

But what exactly was it? She could not seem to remember...

It was not until a rest period on a certain day of the shoot when Shi Zhong Tang sat beside her. "My dad seems to want to replace Ning Yu Ren."

Ning Ning was taken aback, "He wants to replace an actress now?"

Unknowingly, two months had already elapsed since the filming had begun. The weather was slowly getting warmer. As they filmed, their faces would start to shine with sweat, thus they had to stop and let the makeup artist touch up their makeups.

"Her scenes are barely done, the completed ones did not come out nicely." Shi Zhong Tang opened a bottle of water and took a swig, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Besides...there is a bad rumour about her recently. Someone saw her having a tryst with an unfamiliar man in the middle of the night."

Ning Ning was stunned, then she suddenly shivered.

She abruptly remembered the thing she had forgotten.

It was the 7th of July 1990.

It was the day Mama obtained a movie ticket from someone.

"...Do you know what kind of man she was meeting?" She asked.

"I don't. I don't really care about this kind of personal gossip." Shi Zhong Tang narrowed his eyes and looked at her sideways. "Are you alright? You look a little sick."

"Do I?" Ning Ning touched her face, "Maybe the weather is too warm."

She was getting chills despite the hot weather.

For the rest of the shooting, Ning Ning put all of her attention on Ning Yu Ren. It was like what Shi Zhong Tang had said, Director Shi had become prejudiced against her. He would give her hell if her performance standards dropped even a little. Ning Yu Ren would be more careful with her acting everytime she got scolded, her acting would get more stiff as she became more careful, in the end it became a vicious cycle.

She had reached her limits.

10pm, The Hotel.

After a tense day of filming, most people had already fallen asleep. A door opened in the quiet hallway.

Ning Yu Ren poked her head out to take a peek, then she came out of her door and went downstairs without making a sound.

Another door opened behind her after she left. Ning Ning carefully tailed her.

Ning Ning's tracking skills were not good, it was a good thing that Ning Yu Ren was deep in her thoughts and did not notice someone was tailing her. The two of them very quickly arrived at the destination.

In a pitch black alley, under the single white light of a street lamp was the prisoner in white.

Ning Yu Ren approached him while Ning Ning hid behind a wall.

"Have you made up your mind?" The Masked Man asked.

"Can I become as good as her if I go to that place?" Ning Yu Ren asked.

"Of course." The Masked Man smiled. "The reason why she is that good is because she has been to that place."

Ning Yu Ren asked again, "What makes you so sure?"

"Because there is only one place in this world that could remould a person's acting skills in such a short time, transforming them into another person." The Masked Man said, "Just like You Ling."

Even though it was the same body, the person within the body was different, naturally the acting skills would be different.

You Ling was a very pure vase-type actress, which also meant that she was the legendary type of person who made money based on her

looks. So when Ning Ning took over, it looked like her acting skills had improved tremendously to the people around her.

Ning Yu Ren fell silent for a moment, then slowly said, "I don't believe that there are free meals in this world. What price would I have to pay?"

Ning Ning's heart skipped a beat, because she heard the Masked Man laugh. He said with a deep and alluring voice, "All you have to do is take this ticket."

At that moment, Mama's last words flashed across her mind.

—Even as a last resort, never accept a ticket from a staff member.

She could not hold back anymore and jumped out from behind the wall.

"Don't take it!" She shouted at Ning Yu Ren.

Ning Yu Ren and the Masked Man both turned and looked at her.

Ning Ning's blood froze a little from being stared at by the both of them, she also felt a little regret, but she put on a bold face and said, "You already know that there are no free meals in the world, you still dare to take something from him? Who knows what kind of trap is there behind it?"

Ning Yu Ren looked down without saying anything.

The Masked Man laughed casually beside Ning Yu Ren, then turned and looked at her.

"Guess why she's trying to stop you?" He said, "She's afraid that you will become as good as her."

"What's that nonsense?" Ning Ning said with rage.

Unfortunately, Ning Yu Ren seemed to believe the Masked Man over Ning Ning. She shifted her vision onto the ticket in his hands.

Just as she was about to reach out and take the ticket, Ning Ning shouted her name loudly and asked impatiently, "Do you want to become an actress like me that much?"

Ning Yu Ren slowly turned her head and looked at her, her expression had some envy, some jealousy, some hatred and some desolation.

She said, "Of course I do."

Ning Ning, "How badly do you want it?"

Ning Yu Ren furrowed her brows like she did not know how to describe it.

"Can you not touch any other meat except boiled chicken breast in this lifetime?" Ning Ning asked.

"I can." Ning Yu Ren said.

"Even if your wife is about to go into labour, could you finish acting the scene on hand?" Ning Ning said.

"...I am female." Ning Yu Ren answered.

"Alright then." Ning Ning rephrased herself, accepting Ning Yu Ren's view, "Even if your husband is going into labour, could you finish acting the scene on hand?"

"...I can't do that, I have to stay by the side of the father and son in times like this....ptooey!" Ning Yu Ren spat towards the side. "I was almost tricked by you! How can a man give birth! You Ling, what are you trying to do?"

"One question." Ning Ning stared at her. "Final question—Can you give up on acting?"

"No!" Ning Yu Ren answered word by word, resolutely and decisively, "I will never give it up!"

Ning Ning could not help but laugh, a trace of tears flashed across her eyes.

She had the nagging feeling that she had forgotten something.

But what exactly was it? She had finally remembered.

On the day Mama passed away, when she said these words to Ning Ning in the hospital, she did not take her last look at Ning Ning. She was looking behind Ning Ning instead. What was she looking at then?

Now Ning Ning remembered, maybe what Mama saw was a mask.

Stuck on a window, quietly looking inside, not only looking at Mama on the hospital bed, it was also looking at Ning Ning who was going into a cul-de-sac.

When did that mask appear? Maybe it appeared when the crap movie from before failed, maybe it was when she was being mocked by the media, or maybe it was when she was cursing her accursed life that it was slowly but surely getting closer to her.

So, just like Mama who had no choice on the hospital bed.

She too had no choice at that moment.

Ning Ning smiled with a tear in her eyes and took out a ticket from her pocket—she was not able to bring anything with her when she transmigrated, what was strange was, the two tickets had remained with her.

"At midnight, go to the movie theater at 35 Rouge Street to watch a movie." She handed the ticket over to Ning Yu Ren. "Go. That place changed my fate once. It could change yours, too."

Chapter 44

44: The Hunt

Mama is in a bind, she could not decide.

Then let me help her decide.

Ning Ning reached out towards the Masked Man. "Give it to me."

Under the pale-white street light, a smiling mask was looking at her.

"The one you want the most is me." Ning Ning asked in reply, "Isn't it?"

She had long known that she was the Masked Man's first choice, he only switched his target to Mama when he could not get what he wanted.

A laughter rang out from beneath the mask, it had a hint of slyness of someone who had had their way. It was enough to let you suspect his motive for luring Ning Yu Ren, was it to lure Ning Ning then force her to accept the ticket in his hand?

As he was about to hand the ticket over to Ning Ning, he suddenly seemed to have heard something from one side of his ears.

"...That was quick." He tsk-ed, then turned and ran before he could hand the ticket over to Ning Ning.

He looked big and tall but he made no sound when he ran. The white prison uniform was fluttering in the air, as you looked at him from afar he looked like a paper person twirling in the wind.

Then, Ning Ning also heard the sound.

What sound was it? Footsteps, and...

A figure galloped past her the moment she turned her head.

White socks, black cloth shoes, carrying a bulging bag, with a snow-white mask on his face that was covered in raging flames.

It was the Doorman.

"Where do you think you're going?" He let out a ferocious laugh towards the direction the Masked Man had escaped to. He chased after

the Masked Man, leaving a trail of flames behind his mask. The flames burned and danced dyeing the surrounding air in crimson.

Something fell out of his pocket from behind him. It fell to the ground and spun around twice. Ning Ning bent over and picked it up.

It was a mask.

She held the mask and looked up in the direction the Doorman had left. Although he had already left, the air was still filled with the smell of something burnt, it was quite pungent.

"What, what was that?" Ning Yu Ren's legs were wobbly from being scared, she held herself up on the wall. "Was that a human?"

Was he a human?

Were they humans?

Ning Ning also wanted to know the answer to this question.

The sound of the commotion had finally attracted people, a few residents turned on their lights and opened their windows. Someone poked their head out, a few people ran over from a short distance away, there seemed to be a few familiar faces, a few familiar voices.

"The crew is here for us." Ning Ning turned back. "Let's go back."

Ning Yu Ren unexpectedly took a step back and shook her head.

"I'm not going back. It's useless if I go back like this anyway." She fell silent for a moment, then suddenly looked up and gnashed her teeth. "35 Rouge Street, right?"

Ning Ning was stunned, then answered with helplessness and bitterness, "Yes."

The two of them arrived at 35 Rouge Street. When the two familiar clusters of lanterns appeared, when the words Life Theater reflected within Ning Ning's eyes, she actually felt relief.

It really was there. It also looked the same, no matter the two clusters of lanterns in front of the door, or the position of the poster, they were no different from what they were in 2017. If you had to point out a difference, maybe it was that the lanterns and the door looked a lot newer.

Something was missing.

Looking at the surroundings, right, the Doorman was not here.

Ning Yu Ren also looked at the surroundings. Seeing as there was

no one, her vision fell upon the entrance which no one was guarding. Just as she was about to walk in, she was held back by Ning Ning who was behind her.

"Don't sneak in." Ning Ning remembered the warning the Doorman gave her, she told Ning Yu Ren with a serious face, "There will be very scary consequences if you sneak in."

"Heh heh, not bad. The consequences of sneaking in are indeed very scary." A familiar male voice rang out from behind her, a burnt smell filled the air before he even arrived.

Ning Ning turned around, the Doorman had indeed returned.

The masks in the bag on his back clanked as he walked.

Ning Ning looked behind him, but she did not see the man in the smiling mask. She swallowed, wondering if he had escaped or had become one of the masks inside the Doorman's bag.

As he walked past Ning Ning, the Doorman took the mask out of Ning Ning's hand. Back at the entrance, he tossed the bag on the ground and opened it up, revealing the male and female masks within. There were smiling and crying masks. The Doorman loosened his right hand and let the mask fall into the bag.

Afterwards, he slowly turned his head and looked at the two people in front of the door. "Do you have tickets?"

His expression was neither warm nor cold, he looked at people as if they were meat on a hotplate, anyone he stared at would feel chills.

Ning Yu Ren answered with a stutter, "I do, do."

"One person per ticket, invalid upon admission." The Doorman took the ticket from Ning Yu Ren. Her palms were sweaty to the extent that the ticket was soaking wet. He tore the ticket and gave way to the entrance and said blandly, "Go in."

Ning Yu Ren slightly puffed her chest. She took a look at the dark interior then turned back and looked at Ning Ning. In the end, she gritted her teeth, closed her eyes and rushed in.

The Doorman immediately blocked off the entrance after Ning Yu Ren went in.

"What about you?" He looked at Ning Ning and asked, "Are you going back?"

He looked at Ning Ning the same way he looked at Ning Yu Ren.

Ning Ning stared at him blankly for a moment. Just as she was about to ask, 'Do you not recognise me anymore?'

A lazy voice rang out from behind her, asking, "Where are you going back to?"

Ning Ning turned back, Shi Zhong Tang walked towards her as he stepped into the moonlight. He looked like he was smiling yet not at the same time, his peach blossom eyes leisurely turned towards the side of the Doorman, then he twitched his eyebrow and whistled once.

Ning Ning followed the direction of what he was looking at, sweat was rolling down the back of her head.

Beside the Doorman was a poster.

It was a poster in an antique style. The (background) setting was the deep part of a cold palace, the weeds were dismal, there was an old concubine hung on a pagoda tree.

Title: < <Fighting for Favour > >

Starring: Chu Qiu'er

And now, the naked eye could see three words appearing in the space behind Chu Qiu'er—Ning Yu Ren.

The Doorman, "..."

Ning Ning, "..."

Shi Zhong Tang, "..."

The air suddenly turned quiet. *Oh Mama, how am I supposed to explain this supernatural phenomenon to another person?*

"Ha, what just happened?" Shi Zhong Tang looked like a curious cat, he walked in front of the poster without so much as a by your leave. He reached out and touched the names on it and rubbed his fingers. There were no traces of new ink on them, thus he was even more excited. He turned around and asked Ning Ning, "Did you see that?"

"...I didn't see anything." Ning Ning lied blatantly.

"An additional name suddenly appeared on this." Shi Zhong Tang said.

"No, there were two names all along." Ning Ning insisted.

Shi Zhong Tang stopped talking. He looked at Ning Ning as if he was smiling, her blood froze from being stared at. He then smiled

happily and said, "Alright, then. It was my mistake."

Then he turned around and walked towards the entrance of the theater.

Chapter 45

45: Two Smiles

Without waiting for Ning Ning to take action, the Doorman immediately stopped Shi Zhong Tang from entering.

"You don't have a ticket." The Doorman said coldly.

Shi Zhong Tang looked around. "Where is the ticketing counter?"

The Doorman did not answer the question.

Shi Zhong Tang tilted his head and took a look at the Doorman, he took his wallet out. "I'll give you these alright?"

The Doorman gave him an extremely cold look as if what Shi Zhong Tang took out was not a wallet, but a Christmas sock, and within the sock was a study guide.

Shi Zhong Tang was unwilling to give up. He pestered the Doorman for a very long time until the previously shut entrance opened. Ning Yu Ren staggered outside, her eyes were slightly bulging, her right hand was touching her neck while she coughed, as if she had just escaped from being hung and had not recovered.

There were no aesthetics to speak of here. She looked up at the few people in front of the entrance, her expression looked like it was from a lifetime ago. Her line of sight was fixed on Ning Ning, suddenly she rushed over to hug her and bawled her eyes out.

Ning Ning looked at the poster as she patted Ning Yu Ren's back.

It was a good thing the title of the movie did not change, if not the air would turn quiet again.

"What happened?" Shi Zhong Tang came over. "What happened inside?"

"Maybe the movie was too tragic." Ning Ning quickly changed the topic, "Alright, it's getting late, let's hurry back, we have to film tomorrow."

"Alright." Shi Zhong Tang would not let two girls walk alone in the middle of the night, so he temporarily suppressed his curiosity and sent the two of them back.

It was 3am when they got back to the hotel. Ning Yu Ren was in a terrible shape, Ning Ning could only bring Ning Yu Ren back to her room. She used a warm towel to wipe Ning Yu Ren's face and neck. Halfway doing so, Ning Yu Ren suddenly grabbed Ning Ning's wrist.

"You aren't You Ling, right?" Ning Yu Ren faintly looked at her in the unlit room.

Ning Ning hesitated for a moment then nodded to her.

"Who are you?" After experiencing a movie, Ning Yu Ren already wanted to know more, but there were a lot of doubts troubling her at the same time. "Why are you helping me?"

For a moment, Ning Ning almost had a slip of tongue and said, 'I am your daughter.'

"...No matter who you are." Ning Yu Ren said quietly, "Thank you."

Light snores rang out, Ning Yu Ren was too tired and had fallen asleep.

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief and sat by the bed. The sky outside the window started to brighten, filming would continue after daybreak.

They were filming a scene where the male lead was afraid of the problems that would arise if others saw Princess Ling Shan who had walked out of the painting. He locked himself up in his room, living together with her in the inner courtyard.

"!"

Ning Ning slithered out from under the blanket like a white fish. She was wearing white clothes with her long black hair, her fair and tender hands were casting aside the green curtain. Just as she was about to get off the bed, a well-defined arm wrapped around her neck from behind her.

"You want to go back?" Shi Zhong Tang who was also draped in long hair sat behind her, his clothes were slightly opened revealing his clavicle and sturdy chest. He placed his lips by her ear and asked in a low husky voice, "Can't you stay by my side?"

Ning Ning blinked.

She was required to struggle free from Shi Zhong Tang's embrace afterwards, but the script did not specify how she was supposed to do it.

How would she portray this? Would she shout at him with chagrin,

or would she twist her shoulders to get out of his embrace?

Pat. Pat. Pat.

She did not shout nor struggle, she only patted the arm around her neck, signalling for him to let go.

"Oh?" Director Shi was a little surprised and satisfied.

The act of patting encompassed the feeling of an elder person interacting with a younger person, like an adult interacting with a child. A single pat would be an order. The three pats were not fast or slow, not light or heavy, they signified an order that had traces of familiarity.

This also fit the dynamics of the two.

In the movie, Princess Ling Shan was older than the male lead, her status was also higher. The male lead would not even dare to look at her openly while she was alive, he could only peek at her while kneeling down to greet her.

With the difference of age and status, the distance between them would increase over time. This sort of distance could not be shortened within such a short period of time.

So while interacting with him, Princess Ling Shan would not lower herself by shouting for him to let go, it was even less likely that she would try to struggle. She would only lightly pat his arm ordering him to let go. Because to him, she was a princess before she was a lover.

Shi Zhong Tang let go of his arm and looked at her helplessly.

Ning Ning tidied up her top without changing her tone or expression, then walked towards the painting that was hung on the wall. There were mountains, bamboo forests and rocks in the painting, but the center of the painting was empty. A person was missing.

"You come out in the middle of the night and return in the morning." Shi Zhong Tang sighed from behind her, "Why do you have to return to the painting everyday?"

Her jade-like feet stopped in front of the painting.

"What's so attractive inside the painting?" Shi Zhong Tang sat with his legs curled up on the bed, he propped his cheek up with one hand and smiled at her from behind the curtain. "Those few rocks, few bamboos, could they be compared to this richly ornamented building, this warm bed and me who is on this bed?"

Although he was teasing her, his expression was very serious. There

were not many girls who could reject such a serious look on such a handsome face.

Ning Ning who was standing in front of him slowly turned her head.

The camera was pointed at her. No matter if it was Director Shi or anyone else, everyone paid full attention and fixed their eyes on this head turn.

This was a very important turning point within the script.

Her next move and line would decide why the male lead would change.

Director Shi and the scriptwriter had a discussion at length for the sake of this next line and action. They even called Chen Guan Chao who fell into decadence because his edits to the script were mostly deleted, but their discussion ended without a conclusion.

What exactly should Princess Ling Shan say and do so that the male lead would give up on his current decadent lifestyle? For him to desperately try to find a way—A way to enable her to completely live outside of the painting, a way to make her into an actual person instead of a person within the painting!

After they failed to come up with anything, Director Shi could only let Ning Ning express herself. He held no expectations, he was ready to shout 'cut.'

But once he looked closely at her expression, the 'cut' was stuck in his throat.

Even Shi Zhong Tang was mildly shocked.

Because the expression on her face was simply too weird.

It was too cold for it to be the look of a lover, it was too familiar for it to be the look of a stranger, it looked like she cared about him while not at the same time.

"Aren't you just playing around?" This sentence laid his thoughts bare, then she smiled.

It was not a plaintive smile, nor was it a resentful smile. On the contrary, it had a trace of an unexplainable pity, no one knew what she was really thinking when she said that.

Director Shi was dazed for a moment, he shouted cut all of a sudden and clapped his hands once. "Pass! This is a good expression!"

Indeed, there was no better expression.

—Because it was brimming with secrets.

Just like the famous painting < <Mona Lisa> >, the reason the smile of this woman went down in history was because she was mysterious. Modern people used an emotional discerning software to analyse the smile and found that it was rich in connotation. It consisted of 83% happiness, 9% hate, 6% fear and 2% anger. Then here was the question. What was she happy about? What was she hating? What was she afraid of? What was she angry about?

For centuries, there were countless answers among countless people.

Ning Ning's smile might not be eternal like Mona Lisa, but it was good enough for this movie. It could even be said that as long as she had this smile, her performance for the rest of the movie would not even matter anymore.

She had achieved the maximum vase results.

—Letting the audience remember this shot, letting most of the audience remember this scene for a long time.

Afterwards, mid day break.

"Aren't you just playing around?"

Ning Ning was sitting on a chair, getting her hair accessories removed by a makeup artist in the makeup room. She opened her eyes and looked at the mirror in front of her.

The mirror reflected her and Shi Zhong Tang who was behind her.

Shi Zhong Tang said with a smile, "Let me help you remove those."

He sent the makeup artist away then removed a jade hairpin from Ning Ning's bun. He asked with a smile, "How did you suddenly come up with this line?"

Ning Ning started to smile.

It was that elusive smile again, reflected in the mirror in front of her.

Shi Zhong Tang looked at the smile within the mirror, suddenly he bent down and told her as if feeling wronged, "Don't tell me you were speaking from the heart? I'm innocent! I'm a serious person, I've never even had a girlfriend!"

Ning Ning turned her head and looked at him.

He had indeed never had a girlfriend, but that didn't mean that he didn't have female friends. After he committed suicide, there were two famous actresses, four smaller actresses, a socialite and a lot of other unknown girls claiming to be his girlfriend, wanting to claim his ashes. There was even one who wanted to take up widowhood for him, it was an indescribable mess.

Afterwards, if anyone were to mention him, they would describe him as such—going through a flower bush without getting leaves stuck on his body.¹

"!"

They began the second set of filming.

They were going to film the highlight scene for Yan Hong Xiu.

In this scene, Yan Hong Xiu had finally shed the innocence of a girl after going through strict training, displaying an astonishing level of feminine charm. It was so charismatic that the male lead who had his heart set on Princess Ling Shan displayed a moment of uncertainty.

"Young Master, lunch is here." Ning Yu Ren in the green servant girl clothing gently knocked on the door.

"Put it by the door." Shi Zhong Tang's voice came from within.

"I would not dare to let Young Master do it himself." Ning Yu Ren was there on orders, she could not leave just like that. "Could you kindly open the door and let me bring it in for you?"

"Why are you talking back?" Shi Zhong Tang's voice was quite irritated, "Put it where I tell you to!"

He was getting more and more irritable because he was going nowhere with Princess Ling Shan, losing his graceful young master image, losing his temper easily. A few servants dared to challenge his authority and entered his room, they were then chased out of the house after being punished.

"...Yes." Learning from others' mistakes, Ning Yu Ren put down the tray of food.

She turned around and her grim gaze fell onto the pond not far from her.

Plop. A woman was shouting for help, "Help! Help!"

Within the study, Shi Zhong Tang who was opening a scroll of painting and touching Princess Ling Shan on the painting was taken aback by the sound. He pushed open the door and saw someone

flopping about in the pond crying and shouting, "Save me, Young Master! Save me, Young Master!"

Shi Zhong Tang hurried over and scooped the person out of the water.

The person in his arms was trembling, she shivered and told him in a crying voice, "Please, please don't tell Master about this. He would definitely punish me if he knew I made a mistake on my first errand."

The Young Master in front of her was the weakest towards girls. He sighed upon hearing her words, bridal carried her and returned to the room.

"There is charcoal in the room, dry your clothes by yourself." He placed the person on the floor, then turned over.

"Young Master." The girl behind her called out to him in a weak voice.

"What is it?" Shi Zhong Tang turned back without precaution, then was stunned.

Ning Yu Ren was sitting with her back facing him. She was soaked through the bone, her green clothes were stuck to her body, outlining her curvy figure. Like a lotus leaf sprouting out of The West Lake that had yet to bloom, making it look more innocent and cute.

Originally she only gave off an innocent feeling. But now she was half-dressed, revealing a smooth and fair shoulder, her cheeks were slightly slanted, water droplets rolled down her cheeks dripping onto her smooth and moist shoulder.

She yelped in surprise as if she did not expect Shi Zhong Tang to turn back and look at her, she quickly pulled her clothes over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry!" Shi Zhong Tang quickly turned his head back. Everyone else behind the camera did not look away.

"Oh?" Director Shi had a satisfied and surprised look on his face again.

Ning Yu Ren ad-libbed that last action.

The script had only indicated for Yan Hong Xiu to seduce the male lead while half-dressed, but it did not indicate that she would pull her clothes back on. But pulling her clothes back over her shoulder came off a lot better.

It could be described as someone who could not express her

embarrassment.

"...Alright." Shi Zhong Tang relaxed his tone. His face wasn't shown as his back was facing the camera, but the way he spoke had already expressed his thoughts. He had wavered. He gently said, "Quickly put on your clothes, I have turned around."

"Yes...Young Master." Ning Yu Ren answered timidly, like a bunny who had been frightened, arousing a man's desire to protect. She turned back and looked at Shi Zhong Tang, seeing that he had indeed turned his back, her lips slowly curled upwards, revealing a smile.

The people behind the camera gasped.

That was such a scary smile.

Reckless with greed, unscrupulous in efforts, determined to win, she did not look like she was looking at a man, she looked like a starving person looking at food, as if she would die if she did not get to eat it.

How would they know what Ning Yu Ren had gone through in yesterday's movie, < Fighting for Favour >. She had to fight for a man with an entire harem, this man's grace represented what she could eat, what she could wear, where she would live, how she would live and how she would die.

Director Shi was dazed for a while, then he suddenly clapped his hands once. "Cut! Pass!"

Then he turned and looked towards Ning Ning, "Get prepared, it's your turn."

Ning Ning nodded, many people behind her exchanged looks.

The situation was not good for Ning Ning.

Ning Yu Ren had done too well in her scene, so well that it largely affected the next scene.

In the next scene, for the sake of finding out who her opponent was, Yan Hong Xiu hid in a dark place and peeped at the male lead while he was summoning Princess Ling Shan. The moment Yan Hong Xiu saw the true face of the other party, she could not help but feel ashamed of her ungainly appearance.

How was that possible?

Ning Ning's smile might be mysterious, but Ning Yu Ren's shoulder was equally alluring. When you compare the two, a lot of men would feel that Ning Yu Ren's flesh was more fresh and exciting.

What did Ning Ning, in other words Princess Ling Shan, have that would let this beauty feel ashamed of herself?

Chapter 46

46: Fighting for Favour

"Action!"

Charcoal was burning in a basin, the beautiful girl in the green clothes was curled up asleep beside it. Although she was soundly asleep, every inch of her flesh was tempting the person beside her.

Especially the fair, smooth and round shoulder that was peeking out ignorantly from the clothes.

A hand reached out from her side, but it retracted itself before it touched her shoulder as if it was electrocuted. Shi Zhong Tang looked down at his hand, as if he could not believe what he just did.

After a short moment of panic, he quickly turned around and returned to the study table. He repeatedly said to the drawing on top, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry...I was just possessed for a moment..."

Behind him, Ning Yu Ren opened her eyes without making an expression, then she smiled slyly at the view of his back.

She was not sleeping at all.

Being by his side was being in a battlefield, every inch of her flesh was a weapon. Now, she wanted to see what the shrivelled woman in the painting would do to counter her efforts.

The shot slowly shifted from her to another spot.

A crew member laid prone on the floor, he started up the smoke tube in his hand, wisps of white gas filled the air, it looked like steam billowing on top of a lake.

As the cloud billowed and misted, a girl in white slowly walked out from behind the smoke waves, like a moon behind clouds, like snow swirling in a blizzard.

Ning Yu Ren frantically closed her eyes and continued to pretend to sleep after briefly catching a glimpse of her. She pricked her ears and eavesdropped on their conversation.

"Ling Shan, don't be angry." Shi Zhong Tang's voice had a trace of awkwardness and guilt.

"Why would I be angry?" Princess Ling Shan laughed. "Because of her?"

Ning Yu Ren heard a rustling sound, it was the skirt scraping across the floor which had arrived in front of her.

Her eyes remained shut, she did not dare to look at the expression on the other party.

She could only make a guess, would you be angry? Jealous? Or pretend to be magnanimous? No matter the reaction, she would have a plan to handle them.

But the only thing Princess Ling Shan blandly said from above her head was, "The palace is crawling with people like her."

Ning Yu Ren was slightly taken aback.

...What was going on? Was this how you would react when you see your lover hiding another woman in his room?

"Imperial concubines, maids, eunuchs, everyone was doing the same thing—fighting." The voice above her head remained bland.

The more she listened the more Ning Yu Ren felt uncomfortable. She felt that a girl should not have reacted this way. She thought that Director Shi would shout 'cut' anytime now, but he did not.

"Fighting over a seat, a plate of pearls, a line of praise. They would fight over anything, they would fight over the course of their entire lives." The tinkling of accessories rang out, as if she was gently shaking her head, shaking her bun along with it. "Sometimes when I looked at them, it was like looking at koi fish in the pond. They would group up with their mouths opened for anyone who approached them, repeatedly begging for food."

Why is he not shouting cut yet? Why was she allowed to be so calm?

What are you doing Director Shi?

...Exactly what kind of expression is she making while looking at me?

Ning Yu Ren finally could not bear it any longer and opened her eyes.

Chills ran down her spine uncontrollably the moment she saw the expression on the other party.

Ning Ning was wearing white, standing in front of her like a snow-capped tree. The way Ning Ning looked at her was like a noble who would occasionally stop by a pond and watch the koi fish as they fight

over food.

"They would stuff themselves even if they could not eat anymore, afraid that they would not have another chance to eat again." She started laughing, the sandalwood fan was covering the front part of her face, her eyes had a lofty look of pity. "How pitiful."

Ning Yu Ren looked at her blankly.

She had seen such an expression before. Yes, there was another woman that had once looked at her in the same way.

When she transmigrated into the movie <<Fighting for Favour>>, everyone but one person had to fight. That one person was the Empress!

That woman smiled as she watched Ning Yu Ren get into the Emperor's bed, she smiled again as she watched Ning Yu Ren get a hanging death sentence by the Emperor because of slander.

Ning Yu Ren had once treated her as a fool. In the end, she realised that the one who was a fool was herself.

The fighting would always amount to nothing. A koi and a flower would not be able to win in a fight for eternal favor.

At that moment, the smile of the Empress had merged with Ning Ning's smile.

She might have been smiling, but what was written in her eyes was—indifference.

"Cut!"

Director Shi's shout interrupted their gaze.

This was when Ning Yu Ren came back to her senses.

...The scene was already over?

"...Excuse me." She got up from the floor, avoiding the hand of the makeup artist who was trying to give her a touchup. She quickly walked towards Director Shi and the cameraman.

Director Shi was not in a bad mood when he saw her walked over, which was a rarity in recent times.

"You did quite well this time." He said amiably, "You have to keep your condition, maintain this standard in the following few days, can you do that?"

Ning Yu Ren nodded her head haphazardly as she looked at the

freeze frame on the camera.

The last frame was that of her and Ning Ning looking at each other.

The shot on Ning Ning's face no doubt had the lofty and indifferent expression.

And the shot on her face was...

"Sigh..." Ning Yu Ren sighed then laughed helplessly.

It had appeared again.

The expression she had when she was hung while looking at the bedchamber of the Empress.

The shame due to her ungainly appearance, and...longing.

The three most important scenes were done, everything afterwards went smoothly.

Night came, Ning Yu Ren stayed behind with a few supporting characters for a night shoot. Ning Ning was done for the day, so she had her makeup removed and was preparing to rest at the hotel.

The moon hung above the trees. A voice came from behind the trees.

"Do you not care about me too?"

Ning Ning got a fright from him. She looked over and could not help but rolled her eyes, "You scared the living daylights out of me!"

"Tell me, Ling Shan." Shi Zhong Tang approached her in an elegant way. For the sake of catching up to Ning Ning, he did not even change out of his costume, he was still wearing the ancient garb from the movie. He blinked at Ning Ning and said, "Do you not care much about me like how Yan Hong Xiu does?"

"I'm off work." Ning Ning said, "I am not Ling Shan."

"Alright then, I am also off work." Shi Zhong Tang shrugged, "Shi Tou Ge is here."

Ning Ning could not stop him if he wanted to get off work, the only person in the crew that could stop him was his dad.

Wind began blowing from behind the trees.

"I'm not just playing around." Shi Zhong Tang said suddenly.

Ning Ning smiled at him.

"...Ah, you are looking at me with that expression again." Shi Zhong Tang lifted her chin with his hand. He bowed his head and stared into her eyes. "The way you look at me is like looking at an old friend who knows you inside out."

Ning Ning pushed him away, he smiled as he took two steps back. "But your attitude towards me is not of an old friend."

"Are you done?" Ning Ning furrowed her brows. "If you carry on with this, I will report you for sexual harassment!"

"No, you won't." Shi Zhong Tang looked at her gently. "No matter what kind of things I do to you, you wouldn't do anything to me, you would only give in and forgive me...Why?"

...Because the person who would die is the king.

Ning Ning looked at him speechlessly, she didn't know how he managed to notice it.

But it was like he said. Knowing he would commit suicide, she did not dare stop him. She felt nothing but pity and guilt towards him. Thus, no matter what he did to her, as long as it didn't go overboard, she would close an eye.

"...How mysterious." Shi Zhong Tang looked at her, puzzled. "We definitely have known each other only for a short time, but you look like you understand me very well. You definitely don't like me, but you give in to me everytime..."

The trees were swaying in the wind, the bright and clear moonlight was sliced up by the leaves, gently sprinkled on his hair, like a silver laurel crown, he was like a moon god full of temptation, but he was tempted by her (instead).

"You are so close yet so far. I feel like I can catch you just by reaching my hand out, but it also feels like I can never catch you." He smiled at Ning Ning. "You really are like the person within the painting."

Ning Ning fell silent for a moment then told him, "Then don't waste time on me. Anyway..."

He suddenly hugged her.

"...Even if you are the person within the painting." He placed his lips by her ear and told her seriously, "I want you to stay by my side forever."

Ning Ning did not struggle to break free of his embrace. What got

him to let her go was a surging beer belly...No, Director Shi.

Ning Ning finally breathed a sigh of relief as she watched Director Shi pull Shi Zhong Tang away by the ear. She touched both sides of her face and murmured to herself, "He came just at the right time."

If Director Shi had been slightly late, Shi Zhong Tang would have seen her blush.

Originally, she had wanted to return to the hotel to rest, but Ning Ning changed her mind. She took two breaths and told herself, "Let's enjoy some cold air and calm down."

No matter how unpopular she was, she was still a celebrity. She left the crew after she wore a mask, then wandered around on unfamiliar streets. Eventually, she wandered in front of a familiar building.

Life Theater.

Ning Ning could not help but exclaim in surprise.

The Doorman was not here again.

In 2017, he would unshakably be there everyday. Why would he slack off so much in 1990? Ning Ning circled around the entrance a few times. Suddenly, sonorous footsteps rang out from behind her, the Doorman had returned with a bag of masks again. He did not acknowledge her existence as he looked at his surroundings.

He seemed to be a little tired as he conveniently chucked the bag of masks on the floor, then sat down on it while hanging his head low as if he was taking a nap.

Ning Ning looked at him for a moment, then walked over and asked him, "...You really don't recognise me?"

He did not bother to look up. "Yes."

Ning Ning fell silent for a moment, then she asked again, "Then why did you ask if I wanted to go back?"

He continued looking down, "..."

Ning Ning suspected that he fell asleep, she walked over and squatted in front of him.

He looked up at her all of a sudden, behind the snow-white mask were a pair of cruel eyes.

But she did not look away from his gaze, she continued to look at him with her clear eyes.

"So annoying." In the end, he was the one who could not bear the way they were looking at each other and tried to wave her off, but he was low on energy and hung his head low again. He explained impatiently, "Because your brightness in our eyes is different."

Ning Ning was taken aback, "What brightness?"

The Doorman sluggishly raised his right hand and gestured a length of a candle with two of his fingers, "In our eyes, humans are like a candle."

Then, he shrunk the distance between his two fingers, leaving only one third of the original length.

"In our eyes you are only left with this much now." The Doorman said, "The shorter the candle, the brighter the flame. You want to know why I asked if you would like to go back?"

Ning Ning's face quickly turned pale.

"Because from what I see, you are almost burnt out." The Doorman laughed coldly, "You have already changed the fate of a lead character once right? This is your second?"

Chapter 47

47: Wen Yu

The atmosphere was a little sombre, a crass birdcall just had to ring out at this moment. Ning Ning looked up and saw a ball of black spinning above her, they seemed to be crows.

After the crows left, Ning Ning slowly looked back at the Doorman. "...What will happen if I change the fate of the lead character twice, or thrice?"

The Doorman let out a laugh, then looked sideways behind him.

Ning Ning followed his vision.

Behind him were masked people. They were packed behind the entrance of Life Theater. They looked at her with jealousy and greed, like prisoners filled with the desire to look at the outside world.

The Doorman slowly turned back and laughed, "You can try it."

How would she dare to?

From that day onwards, everyone with eyes could see that she was distancing herself from Shi Zhong Tang.

Besides the times when they would film together, she would avoid him. If she could not avoid him, she would close her eyes to rest, like now.

Ning Ning was lying down on the chair in front of the dresser, a jacket was draped across her body, her eyes were closed as if she was taking a nap.

"Why have you been ignoring me recently?" Two hands were propped up on the back of the chair she was lying on, Shi Zhong Tang's voice rang out from above her head.

"..." You could never wake a person who was pretending to be asleep.

"I know you are pretending to be asleep." Shi Zhong Tang fell silent, suddenly he asked while sounding hurt, "Do you hate me so much?"

"I don't hate you." Ning Ning thought with her eyes closed. "I'm only afraid of you."

What the Doorman said made her restless. She felt that she did not do anything that would change Shi Zhong Tang's fate, but the Doorman did not feel the same way. When she thought about it again, she felt that the Doorman was right.

After all, she was right in the midst of it. Watching things from an outsider's point of view was different. She might feel that she did not do anything, but from a spectator's point of view, the answer would be completely different.

She sighed and opened her eyes. "Wait till the end of the filming of this movie."

Shi Zhong Tang, "Hmm?"

Ning Ning did not even have the courage to look at his eyes while she spoke. She stared at his reflection in the mirror and said, "I will give you a definite answer after we finished filming this movie."

As she said this, her ending tone had a very slight tremble. She felt like she had become a murderer, especially when she saw the clear and surprised smile of Shi Zhong Tang in the mirror.

How could she tell him—once the filming was done, you would die.

"Then it's a promise. Once the filming is done, you would give me a definite answer." Shi Zhong Tang said with a smile, his eyes were brighter than usual. It was common with most people, their eyes would suddenly lit up when they saw their love interest. "Right, I only take 'yes' for an answer."

Ning Ning closed her eyes, it was even harder to look at his eyes now. She carelessly answered, "Let's talk about it after everything wraps up."

That would be the day Shi Zhong Tang committed suicide.

All alone, without anyone around him, dying alone.

Once he died, this movie would end. Once he died, she would be able to go back. Once he dies, her candle would stop burning. It didn't matter if it was her life, health or anything else that was burning.

But when she saw the lively smile in the mirror, Ning Ning could only firmly grip the bottom of her clothes to force herself not to say anything, to force herself not to ask—why would someone like you commit suicide?

"Here you are." Director Shi's voice suddenly rang out, a beer belly attempted to come in, but it got stuck in the door. "Damn it! Is this a

door for dogs! Ahhhh! I'm finally out...Come, come. Come out both of you, let me introduce someone to the two of you."

Today, a new actor had arrived in the cast.

An actor who would portray a younger version of the male lead.

"This is my son, Wen Yu." Director Shi pulled Wen Yu out from behind him and introduced him to everyone, "Here, greet aunties and uncles."

Everyone's eyes brightened, because Director Shi had pulled an angel out from behind him. He had fair and tender cheeks, thin soft hair and eyebrows, along with a big pair of untainted eyes.

Ning Ning was taken aback the moment she saw him.

She recognised him.

Although they had not met for two years, he had not changed much. His facial features were the same, his face was a little more chubby due to him being well taken care of, he was also slightly taller.

It was Wen Yu.

It was Wen Yu whose life had intertwined with hers in < <Abandoned Child> > .

"This is a child my dad adopted." Shi Zhong Tang told Ning Ning privately after she looked like she was very bothered by him, "He's not a bad kid. It's just that because of his experience in the past, his personality is, um, a little reserved."

It was not just reserved.

Wen Yu was completely unsociable.

He barely talked to anyone in the crew, once he fell silent he could stay silent for the whole day. If not for him speaking while saying his lines, the people in the crew would have thought he was mute.

When he was not filming, he didn't like to be near anyone else. He would find a quiet spot and sit alone, then take out the sketchbook he always had with him and drew.

"What are you drawing?" Ning Ning arrived behind him quietly.

Wen Yu was sitting on a stool in a wooden cloister. Wisteria flowers were hanging on the cloister, petals would flutter down when the wind blew, they fell on the snow-white paper and were whisked off by a tiny hand.

The owner of the hand glanced up at her. He did not answer, then looked back down and continued to draw.

"I see that you still like to draw..." Ning Ning only felt that it was wrong when she finished talking. She was being too familiar by saying that. Just as she was about to correct herself, her attention was caught by the content of the drawing.

The style of his drawing had changed quite a bit, it was no longer childlike, it was a realistic sketch now. Other than being life-like, the sketch did not look like something that a child would draw anymore.

Ning Ning looked up again after taking a look at the drawing. She followed his line of sight and looked at the model.

Then she asked him doubtfully, "Why did you draw her this way?"

Ning Yu Ren was standing not far away from them. After < <Fighting for Favour> >, her entire body had been thoroughly tempered, it had finally become a weapon of seduction. It didn't matter if this weapon was clothed with a cheap skirt, or the green clothes of a maidservant, they could not mask the amorous radiance from within.

But what ended up on the paper was an ettin¹.

Both of its heads were beautiful, but having both of them attached to a single body was enough to make people feel sick.

"She is very weird." Wen Yu glanced up at her, then looked down again. He used a pencil to lightly sketch her hair, "There were many instances where she's like two people."

In front of them, a crew member brought a plate of sliced melons. Ning Yu Ren waved to call the person over. She took a slice and began to eat. After taking two bites, she would suddenly be reminded of her identity, she smiled awkwardly. "Sorry, I was too thirsty, that's why I took two bites. I'll help you bring the rest over?"

It was indeed two people.

The one ordering people around was concubine Ning Yu Ren from < <Fighting for Favour> >. The one who was awkward was the Ning Yu Ren who had meddled around in the entertainment industry for many years with no results.

It was an overnight effort to the people around her, but Ning Yu Ren had already spent ten odd years in < >. While tempering her body to give off an amorous radiance, her habit of ordering people around had also become second nature. She could not shake the habit

off in a short amount of time.

Some of the crew members talked about her behind her back, "She is not even big time yet she has started to act like a prima donna."

Only Wen Yu drew an ettin after looking at her.

Ning Ning looked at him blankly for a while from the side. This might be the difference between an adult and a child. A child could see a lot of things from a point of view adults couldn't.

"Carry on." She told him, "What other weird people there are, draw them all."

Wen Yu took a glance at her, he abruptly shifted his butt to the side. After maintaining a distance between the two of them, he flipped to a new page, placed his pencil on the table and looked at her.

The smile on Ning Ning's face immediately stiffened.

The weird person...is me?

Scratch, scratch, scratch. He started drawing, Wen Yu took another glance at her then back at his book.

Her entire body began to stiffen, what did he see? What will he draw? A three-headed person or a four-headed person? Or maybe he would draw her body with Wen Xiao Ning's head?

1Ettins are giantkin born with two heads.

Chapter 48

48: Bewitched

A hand suddenly reached out from behind Wen Yu and grabbed the book out of his hands.

Shi Zhong Tang was standing behind Wen Yu. He looked at Wen Yu's drawing then turned around and smiled at him, "Let me finish the drawing, this sister is my person within the painting."

Wen Yu looked at Shi Zhong Tang for a while, then jumped off from the stool and ran away.

Just as Ning Ning wanted to stop him, he willingly ran back and stuffed the pencil in his hand to Shi Zhong Tang.

Shi Zhong Tang shrugged as he watched Wen Yu run away again. He smiled at Ning Ning. "Alright, now you can relax."

Ning Ning was shocked by what he said.

"People usually don't like what my brother draws." Shi Zhong Tang flipped the book. "His first art teacher was scared off by his drawing. Look."

He turned the book over and showed the drawing to Ning Ning.

"This is my brother's self-portrait." Shi Zhong Tang said, "He drew this in front of the art teacher while looking at the mirror."

In the end, the drawing had two people.

Wen Yu was standing sideways in front of the easel, there were two hands on his shoulders. Black mist and smoke lines were extended from those two hands and gathered behind him to form a half-length figure of a woman. The face of the woman was unclear. All that could be seen was that she was bleeding, dying.

"Later on I asked him who this woman was." Shi Zhong Tang said, "He said it was Aunt Xiao Ning...the person who fostered him before."

Ning Ning stared at the drawing blankly.

Shi Zhong Tang probably thought she was scared, so he took the book back.

"His aunt died in a fall from a building in front of him, this had a huge impact on him." Shi Zhong Tang looked down at the drawing in his hand, he fell silent for a while before concluding, "He is trapped by the person within the drawing."

He closed the book with a smack after he finished talking.

Everything from the past, the pain, the grey memories seemed to have transformed into black lines and were enclosed in the book the moment it was closed.

"Right, are you thirsty?" Shi Zhong Tang seemed to have switched character. He magically took out two scarlet-red cherry tomatoes from behind him, "Call me Shi Tou Gege1, I will personally feed you, how about it?"

Ning Ning came back to her senses from her trance, she smiled at him grudgingly. "You can have them, I will drink some water."

She frantically escaped after she finished. Shi Zhong Tang shouted from behind her, "Hey, hey, did I say something wrong again?"

He did not say anything wrong.

She was panicking.

Ning Ning had always felt that she had saved Wen Yu. But the moment she saw the drawing, she asked herself, did she really save him? Maybe... she dragged him along with her the moment she fell from the building.

Wen Yu was alive at the moment, but he might only be half-alive, the other half would forever be left in < <Abandoned Child> >. By the corpse on the snowy ground, crying non-stop in the snowstorm, shouting hoarsely, "I beg you, don't abandon me!"

Shi Zhong Tang looked at her stumbling back view from a distance with a complicated expression.

He looked down slowly after a while, opening the book in his hands bit by bit.

He flipped through it page by page, until he reached the page of Wen Yu's most recent drawing.

Children could always see things adults couldn't.

Maybe even Wen Yu didn't know what he had captured and drew?

Shi Zhong Tang was mildly stunned. The drawing of Ning Ning had not taken form, the wisteria flowers and the pillars beside her were all

outlined, peeking out from behind the pillar was an indistinct mask.

He slowly looked towards his right. Behind a pillar in the cloister not far from him, a smiling mask peeked out.

In the next scene, Shi Zhong Tang's performance was a little off.

After the third NG2, Director Shi stuffed sweets into his mouth. "Do you want to take a break? Have some sweets, tune your condition."

"I'll take a break." Shi Zhong Tang got off the set and conveniently smacked Director Shi's beer belly once. "This belly, you should cut down on sweets, otherwise the crew would have to open an additional door tomorrow so that you can walk out."

"Bullshit! Do you think I'm a pet dog!" Director Shi raged, he reached out and pinched Shi Zhong Tang's ears.

Ning Ning let out a laugh as she watched the two of them chase and fight each other, she also felt that something was off.

No matter what Shi Zhong Tang was like in his private life, he was a very dedicated actor when he was filming. How dedicated was he? If the male lead was a swordsman, he would learn swordplay, if the male lead could drive a tank, he would learn how to drive a tank...

Stunt doubles had to be hating his guts! He specialised in ruining their careers!

He performed very well ever since the filming for <<The Person Within the Painting>> started, you could even say he had the best performance. Everyone else's conditions had their peaks and valleys—Ning Ning included with her few NGs—Shi Zhong Tang was the only one who acted unimpeded until now.

It was not until this scene that he would repeatedly lose his concentration, repeatedly getting NGs.

Was this scene very difficult? Ning Ning thought with her brows furrowed, she took a look at the script in her hands.

This was a scene which involved both of them.

If you had to name this scene, it would probably be <<Man Angrily Stabbing His Ex-girlfriend Who Dumped Him>>, or ... <<Bewitched>>.

In this scene, the male lead was increasingly smitten by Princess Ling Shan. This in turn made Princess Ling Shan slowly lose her patience. Princess Ling Shan returned to the painting after the fight, she refused to come out no matter how much the male lead called out

to her. He begged her to no avail. Thus, he decided to find a way for her to leave the painting permanently, willing to pay whatever price it took.

"Alright." Shi Zhong Tang said from the other side of the room, "I'm done with my break, let's start again."

Everyone went back to their positions, Director Shi also quickly swallowed the sweets that were still in his mouth then exclaimed.

"!"

Smoke was curling upwards from the incense burner, it wafted past a half-opened accessory box, revealing the jade hairpins, gold hairpins, hair ornaments and earrings.

Shi Zhong Tang retrieved a peony flower ornament from the box. He placed it on his mouth and breathed out on it to soften the glue on the back of the ornament, then placed it between Ning Ning's eyebrows.

Ning Ning was half reclined on a chaise lounge, her body was engulfed in the smoke and mist. She did not look like something from the mortal realm, she looked like she would dissipate with a gust of wind. It was not until the peony flower ornament was placed between her eyebrows that she looked real and charming.

Shi Zhong Tang looked at her longingly and chimed in, "The peony is the sole true national beauty, shocking the capital when it blooms."³

Ning Ning smiled faintly. She held her head up with an arm and without opening her eyes she lazily uttered, "Li Lang, we should spend some time apart from each other."

After a moment of indescribable silence, Shi Zhong Tang calmly asked her, "Are you serious?"

This calmness was scarier than if he was hysterical, it made even Ning Ning feel scared.

But she was not willing to show weakness, she opened her eyes and looked at him instead. "Yes."

He remained calm, his smile was even more gentle and caring than usual, but the air around them was getting more and more intense.

"Can you tell me why?" He looked at Ning Ning sincerely, "What did I do wrong that caused you to hate me suddenly?"

"...It's just that I think you are too engrossed." Ning Ning pointed to

the wall behind him. "In the end, I'm the same as them, just another painting."

Many scroll paintings were hung on the wall, from landscapes to portraits. Every one of them were drawn by famous artists, they were all precious to Shi Zhong Tang. He would often appreciate the paintings with Princess Ling Shan, critiquing them. He would tease her sometimes, "With this many people to accompany you, you wouldn't be lonely even if I'm not around."

And now, Shi Zhong Tang turned back and looked at the paintings she pointed at. He stood up all of a sudden and walked briskly towards them.

Then, with a rip.

He tore down his favourite Tang dynasty court lady painting from the wall in front of Ning Ning. He then tossed it into the charcoal basin beside him without hesitation.

The corner of the painting caught fire, burning the cheek of the court lady, turning this priceless painting into nothing but black ashes.

Rip, rip, rip... Shi Zhong Tang tore the paintings down from the wall one by one with his back facing Ning Ning, tossing them one by one into the coal basin until the wall was bare, not a painting remained. He slowly turned around.

At that moment, bright flames were dancing on the paintings, illuminating Shi Zhong Tang's face. As it sizzled out it flickered on his face, making him looked like a demon.

"They are gone." He smiled at Ning Ning, "You're the only one left."

Ning Ning stared at him blankly, she felt chills running down her back.

He was like a fire in the night, but it was not warmth in front of her, only a twisted madness.

"...You still don't get it." She could not help but grip the corner of the couch. She did not want to show weakness, but her tone relaxed a little unwittingly, "The two of us are separated by yin and yang, you are of the living, I am of the dead, how could we be tog..."

Before she could even finish, she was pulled into his embrace.

This embrace was reflected in the bronze mirror beside them, the colour of the bronze mirror was so dim and hazy that the two of them looked like they melded together within it.

"I've caught you." Shi Zhong Tang whispered in her ear, "I'm never letting go."

He was too forceful, it made Ning Ning feel a little suffocated. This suffocation made her go into a trance. Was she actually Ning Ning or Princess Ling Shan? Was the person hugging her right now actually Shi Zhong Tang, or the male lead of <<The Person Within the Painting>>?

"... Let go!" She suddenly came back to her senses. She struggled with all her strength to break free from his embrace, then ran towards the direction of the study table. Her usual dignity and nobility was thrown out of the window, she was just a young girl being fearfully chased now. She stumbled while running, an embroidered shoe slipped out of her foot but she did not dare to turn back and pick it up.

A seemingly hot white smoke billowed.

She vanished.

Shi Zhong Tang ran to the front of the table, on the table was the only undamaged painting in the room. On the painting was a girl in white hugging herself with her back facing him, looking pitiful and afraid.

"Ling Shan." Shi Zhong Tang picked up the embroidered shoe and waved it at her. "You dropped your shoe."

The person within the painting did not react.

"Don't be afraid of me." Shi Zhong Tang put the shoe down. He reached out and stroked the person within the painting, from her hair, to her face, to her shoulders. "I will never hurt you."

The person within the painting continued to ignore him.

"...Come out." After a brief moment of silence, Shi Zhong Tang said even more gently, "I was at fault, I should not have done that, I should not have scared you..."

The person within the painting remained in the painting with no intention of stepping out.

Swoosh. Shi Zhong Tang suddenly swiped with his right hand and swept the brush rack and inkstones onto the floor.

Drip, drip, drip... His back faced the camera, standing in front of the table. His right hand was hanging beneath his green sleeve, drops of blood were dripping from his injured finger onto the floor, dyeing it

red.

"...Maybe you are just playing around, maybe you are just treating me as a... gigolo at your beck and call." He smiled dispiritedly, then he raised his injured hand and gently stroked his person within the painting.

The pale white person within the painting was dyed red from his fresh blood.

"But I cannot let go anymore." His eyes were gentle, he spoke from the heart, "Ling Shan, I will let you come out of the painting, forever."

Upon finishing the sentence, he bent over and gave her a kiss.

The shot shifted from his back slowly to his front.

The final freeze frame was that of him slowly straightening up his body and revealing a smile, the corner of his lips were stained with a drop of blood, his expression was so gentle, so desolate, so hurt and so...unbridled due to his all-in gamble.

Such an intense performance stunned everyone until Director Shi clapped once. "Pass!"

Shi Zhong Tang was indeed Shi Zhong Tang. After a few NGs for a short period of time, he displayed far scarier acting skills as compared to before. It practically caused everyone who was acting with him to shiver and struggle to breathe.

Ning Ning perspired after she recovered from her shivers. A good partner could help you improve. She felt that she had a better understanding of Princess Ling Shan, she even felt there was unfinished business after they were done filming for the day.

It was a pity. If Shi Zhong Tang was not the male lead in this movie, she might have gotten closer to him.

"Eh?" She suddenly took notice of a face which was wearing an unfamiliar expression. She walked over, bent down and looked at the person, "Little Wen Yu, what's wrong?"

Wen Yu had his sketchbook back, he was sitting alone in a corner while watching the scene. He had a different expression from the others. He was not impressed. On the contrary, he had a trace of worry (on his face).

He turned around and looked at Ning Ning as he heard her voice. He hesitated and tightened his grip on the sketchbook. He asked meekly, "Did you notice that...brother is a little weird today?"

Ning Ning was taken aback, she looked at where Wen Yu was looking. She only thought that Shi Zhong Tang's every action was full of vigour, he was simply the best actor she had ever seen in her life.

"...He is especially good today." Ning Ning could only come to this conclusion. She looked at Wen Yu. "What about you? What do you think is weird about him?"

"...He is especially psyched today." Wen Yu gently bit his lip. He finally added another sentence after a long time, "I think... he seems to be preparing himself to do something extremely dangerous."

An adult would not believe a child's gut feeling, not to mention that the area had good security. Shi Zhong Tang was also an amateur combat artist, he could take on three guys at once by himself. If he were to meet up with a regular thug, who knew which one of them would be in more danger.

So no one would have expected that, at midnight, with crows circling in the air, Shi Zhong Tang was standing in front of Life Theater with a smile on his face. He was fanning himself using the ticket in his hand.

1This an affectionate way of addressing an older male

2This a Chinese film term for a scene or performance that did not pass, NG is an abbreviation for 'not good'.

3This a line from the poem Peony Pavilion.

Chapter 49

49: Price

The theater stood out amongst the tube-shaped apartments surrounding it. The Doorman at the entrance stood out even more. He looked like he did not care about how well the theater was doing, he was always unpleasant.

"You don't have a ticket, you cannot..." As he was halfway through the sentence, the Doorman looked at the movie ticket that was presented in front of him.

It was no ordinary ticket, nor was it an even-numbered designated ticket, it was also not an odd-numbered designated ticket.

It was a very special ticket.

There was a stamp of a head on it, the head was the portrait of a man. If you looked closely, it included a name: Zhou Ai Guo, a name that had nothing special to it.

The Doorman took a glance then quickly looked up. "Where did you get this ticket?"

"Someone gave it to me?" Shi Zhong Tang said with a smile.

"Where is that person?" The Doorman who was originally sitting on the steps of the entrance had stood up.

"He ran off, but I'm guessing he didn't go far. He should be peeking at us from somewhere nearby." Shi Zhong Tang looked around as he said that. He finally stuck out his lips towards a direction and said, "Is that him?"

A white shadow flew past a broken street lamp. Upon closer inspection, it was the man in the smiling mask. He took a glance at Shi Zhong Tang as he ran for his life, he ended up stumbling on a bump on the road.

The Doorman laughed coldly and chased after him.

"Hey!" Shi Zhong Tang waved the ticket at the Doorman. "You don't want the ticket anymore?"

The Doorman cursed under his breath and flicked his hand.

The ticket in Shi Zhong Tang's hand suddenly caught fire. He exclaimed and loosened his fingers, the ticket fell to his feet and he stepped on it a few times. "Watch out for fire hazards, watch out for fire hazards."

"One person per ticket, invalid upon admission!" The Doorman's voice rang out from a distance, his back view had vanished when Shi Zhong Tang looked up again.

Shi Zhong Tang let out a laugh.

Although he accepted the ticket from the Smiling Mask, it didn't mean that he had to follow the latter's instructions. The reason he came to Life Theater was to see if the ticket would really allow him to enter.

It didn't matter if he could not enter. The Smiling Mask was scared to enter the theater even though he had a ticket, that clearly indicated that the theater had something he wanted, and something he was afraid of—for example, the Doorman who was chasing him like a rabbit? He could enter even when the Doorman was attempting to catch the Masked Man.

"Good luck my man, it's up to you to crack down on ticket scalpers!" Shi Zhong Tang shouted insincerely towards the direction of the Doorman. He turned around and walked towards the theater. Just as he was about to enter, he stopped in his tracks and whistled at the poster on the wall.

Title: < <Fraud> >

Starring: Zhou Ai Guo

There were three men in the poster. They were standing by a cliff, holding onto boxes full of cash. Countless guns were pointed at them.

The face on the leftmost side was a little familiar, it looked vaguely like the portrait on the ticket.

Shi Zhong Tang turned back and walked into the theater.

"Welcome!"

A group of masked people welcomed him passionately. They were wearing clothes from different eras, wearing all kinds of masks and sporting all kinds of accents.

"Please follow me, customer." A little lady in a Tang dynasty court lady mask said, "Here is your seat."

Shi Zhong Tang looked at her with a smile. He suddenly reached

out to take off her mask.

But he was unable to do so, it was as if the mask was a part of her face.

"Please don't do that." The little lady pushed his hand away. "My mask cannot be removed."

He did not ask her why it could not be removed, instead he skillfully asked, "How do I remove it? I want to look at your face."

The little lady was taken aback, she looked up at him. All she could see was a pair of amorous eyes which looked almost emotionless. No one knew if he meant what he said. She stammered for a while and answered, "Wait for my movie to air..."

Someone by her side gave her a tug before she could finish, thus she quickly stopped talking.

Shi Zhong Tang did not make things difficult for her anymore. He was in no hurry to watch the movie at all, on the contrary, he was more interested in the staff. He tried to take off their masks as he walked past each of them, but he failed to take off a single one.

Finally a staff member could not bear it anymore and told him, "Please return to your seat, customer. The movie is about to start."

"Relax, relax, I want to look around first." Shi Zhong Tang waved his hand at him. He continued to randomly walk around in the theater. Suddenly, he turned back and asked the staff members who were following him, "Can you guys not do anything to me?"

A few of the staff members had already lost their patience, most of the others were largely unhappy. If this was another establishment, they would have started scolding him if they had not chased him out, but they only followed him with a look of disdain.

Shi Zhong Tang narrowed his eyes at them for a while, he abruptly turned around and ran towards the back.

"You cannot go in there!" The staff members rushed over desperately. Unfortunately, Shi Zhong Tang was used to hiding from his dad since his childhood. On top of that, he starred in a *wuxia* film, he was extremely agile. He found a way out of the crowd of people and broke into the projection room.

What would he see? A projectionist wearing black framed glasses? A projector as old as the lanterns at the entrance? A wall of female celebrity posters? A shelf full of videotapes?

The moment he opened the door to the room, he saw a man in a prison uniform.

The man had his back to Shi Zhong Tang, he took something off his face with both his hands, then pressed it against the old projector in front of him.

He slowly turned back upon hearing movement behind him.

Countless hands reached out from behind Shi Zhong Tang, dragging him back before he could take a good look at the person's face. In the end he only saw one thing clearly—masks.

There were no films or tapes in the projection room. It was filled with masks from the floor up to the ceiling.

"Alright!" The staff members pushed Shi Zhong Tang down onto his seat amidst the flurry and confusion. One of them said with gritted teeth, "The movie has begun. Enjoy!"

"Ok, ok, ok." Shi Zhong Tang smiled absent-mindedly, he was still thinking about what happened in the projection room. As the opening theme rang out beside his ear, he slowly began to lose control of his hands, his feet, and his body. He could not help but open his eyes wide, watching the sentence appearing on the screen.

< <The Person Within the Painting> > production team, the next day.

Ning Ning looked at the side of Shi Zhong Tang's face strangely. Was it her misconception? She felt that his face was especially pale today, it was as if he had contracted a serious illness overnight.

"Li Lang." They were still in the middle of filming. She temporarily suppressed the doubts she had and put on the airs of Princess Ling Shan. She asked him coldly, "Do you know that by doing this, you have to pay a huge price?"

The scene today was titled < <Price> > .

For the sake of allowing Princess Ling Shan to leave the painting, for the sake of reviving the dead, the male lead decided to collect the ingredients for the revival medicine, which included the dirt of the imperial mausoleum, the hair of Princess Ling Shan, pieces of the imperial jade seal and more. Any one of those items were enough to get his possessions confiscated and his family exterminated ten thousand times.

"I know." But before getting his possessions confiscated and his family exterminated, Shi Zhong Tang had already paid a price. He

pulled out a dagger from his waist and slashed himself on the face. A bloodstain spanning from the left to the right of his face emerged, destroying his handsome face. He looked back and smiled at her. "No one would know who I am even if I get caught like this."

Ning Ning choked, seemingly frightened by his smile. She used a fan to cover her face after a while and mocked him, "Even if you don't get your possessions confiscated and family exterminated, you cannot escape death."

He fell silent for a moment, before quietly repeating her sentence, "...cannot escape death?"

The red lips behind the fan curled up. She thought she had gotten a hold of his weakness. Just as she was about to take advantage of it, he suddenly laughed, turned back and walked towards her.

Another wave of white fog billowed.

Ning Ning who had been standing on the table had vanished again, leaving only the painting of Princess Ling Shan.

Shi Zhong Tang picked a brush from the brush rack. He dipped it in the ink slab then started painting on it. The day had turned to night before he finally put down the brush and said with a smile, "Done."

A new person was added to the painting which originally only had Princess Ling Shan.

The person stood on the bridgehead, his sleeves were fluttering in the wind, he smiled and gazed at Princess Ling Shan with amorous eyes—he painted himself.

"If I survive, you will survive. We will be together forever." Shi Zhong Tang smiled at the person within the painting. "If I die, I will accompany you in the painting. We will never be apart."

He blew at the ink on the paper to dry it after he finished his sentence. Just as he was about to roll up the painting and bring it along in his journey to seek for the medicine, he suddenly furrowed his brows. He held himself up with one arm on the table, his other arm covered his mouth while he started to cough violently.

The whole crew panicked as he fell head first in front of the table.

"Are you alright, Son?!"

"Oh my god, get him to the hospital!"

"Get an ambulance!"

"I'm fine!" Shi Zhong Tang shouted. He grabbed onto Director Shi's arm and stood up, he flashed a pale smile at everyone. "I'm a little dizzy, maybe it's the heat. I will rest by the side, the rest of you continue."

As he walked past Ning Ning, he grabbed her hand and naturally leaned on her shoulder.

Director Shi who had been heartlessly tossed aside, "..."

Ning Ning who did not know what to do, "..."

In the end, Director Shi cleared his throat. "You Ling, you should take him back for him to rest."

"Oh, ok..." Ning Ning obeyed.

The hotel was not far from where they were. Shi Zhong Tang was not sick to the point where he could not walk. It was just that the reporters who were taking photos while following them were a little annoying. Who knew what they would write for tomorrow's newspaper. Ning Ning finally sent Shi Zhong Tang back to the hotel with great difficulty. Just as she was about to leave, he held her back by the arm.

"Let go." Ning Ning would always be serious with him, just like how Princess Ling Shan treated the male lead.

He would always smile at her, it was as if he even liked it when she was angry.

"Tell me." Shi Zhong Tang laid on the bed, he looked up with a face as pale as paper, his smile a little desolate. "Is my life but a two-hour movie to you?"

Chapter 50

50: Another Side

"You've been to that place?" Ning Ning let it slip out of her mouth, she immediately bit down on her lip as she said that.

A trace of light flashed in Shi Zhong Tang's eyes, seemingly saying 'sure enough'.

"I've been there." He smiled at her. "It was a movie titled < <Fraud> >. The movie was based on a true story which happened three years ago. I saw it on the news. Three swindlers wanted to escape from the country after swindling a huge sum of money, they were betrayed by someone while escaping and they died. After I entered the theater, suddenly there was only darkness in front of me, then—I became one of the swindlers..."

Ning Ning unwittingly sat down and listened to his story.

Shi Zhong Tang could do crosstalk for a living if he wasn't an actor. He recounted his experience vividly. Ning Ning could not help but laugh when he said that, for the sake of causing confusion, he cross-dressed as a pregnant woman and shouted, "My water broke!" Then he managed to cheat a driver, a passenger and even an old Chinese medicine practitioner onboard the car, the three of them sent him to the obstetrician.

...Wait a minute! Who am I, where am I, what the heck am I doing? Why am I suddenly listening to a crosstalk?

"Cough!" Ning Ning hastily shook her head, she shook the image that almost made her laugh out of her head, then told him with a serious face, "You should not have entered that place."

Shi Zhong Tang, "Why not?"

Ning Ning, "You just vomited like a pregnant woman and you're asking me why not?"

"What about you?" Shi Zhong Tang reflected the question back at her, "Have you ever vomited like a pregnant woman?"

"..." Ning Ning stared at him, she did not know how to answer him. Suddenly, someone knocked on the door. Ning Ning walked over and opened it. A service staff from the hotel was standing at the door, he

was holding a stack of magazines and newspapers. The stack was so high that it blocked his face, only his voice could be heard from behind it, "Is Mr Shi here? This is what he requested."

Ning Ning brought the stack of magazines and newspapers into the room and placed them beside a certain sick person.

< <Economic Weekly> >, < <Some City's Evening Newspaper> >... they were all old magazines and newspapers. He flipped through them, then handed a page of a newspaper to Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked at him with doubt before taking it out of his hands.

On the black and white paper was a huge word—< <Fraud> >.

She was stunned. She skimmed the contents and realised that this was a newspaper from three years back. The three swindlers tried to escape with the money, one of them turned himself in and survived, the other two died.

"Everything was true. I changed the plot of the movie, which in turn changed reality." Shi Zhong Tang combed his hair with both his hands, his eyes sparkled with excitement. "This is simply..."

"Too scary." Ning Ning put the newspaper down.

"Too interesting." Shi Zhong Tang gave his thigh a pat.

Both of them were taken aback, then they looked at each other.

This was the first time the two of them got to know each other, or you could say, the first time they saw the other side of the other, the true selves under the beautiful wrappings.

Shi Zhong Tang started laughing. "So you're actually a coward."

"Thanks, courageous dumb dumb." Ning Ning returned the newspaper to him.

The two of them parted, but the issue had not been dealt with.

"...Big Sis." Wen Yu climbed onto a chair opposite her during dinner, his fair tender hand was holding an orange while he looked at her with his pitch black eyes. "Did Brother do anything dangerous?"

Ning Ning froze and thought a little, before deciding to shirk the responsibility. "If you are really worried about him, you can tell Director Shi. Let Director Shi watch over him."

"Papa is doing something very dangerous." Wen Yu played with the

orange in his hand.

Ning Ning gasped. *Dir-Director Shi, don't tell me you too...*

"I just found out Papa had been eating chocolates behind our backs. This much chocolate." He used his hands to draw a big circle in the air, then sighed with melancholy, "He will get too fat to be able to walk."

Ning Ning, "..."

"Can you tell me if you find out that brother is doing anything dangerous? Right, this is for you." Wen Yu reached out and offered the peeled mandarin to Ning Ning.

"What is this?" Ning Ning smiled at him. "Are you bribing me?"

Wen Yu gently shook his head. He looked at the drumstick and fatty meat in her mealbox. "Dinner is too greasy, you can have this orange."

After he finished talking, he climbed down from the chair and ran away.

Although his demeanour had changed a lot, he was still the gentle little angel on the inside, he could not help but help others.

Ning Ning's vision slowly shifted from the direction he left in to the orange on the table. She told herself, "It's useless even if you call me big sis sweetly, I won't go. Don't think about buying me over with just an orange, I possess an iron will..."

Midnight, entrance of Life Theater.

"Hold it!"

Shi Zhong Tang turned around, the corner of his mouth curved upwards, his smile was charming and mischievous. "Wow, why are you here?"

...It was only an orange, why did she come? Ning Ning hated the orange and hated herself. She rushed over with rage, grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Let's go, it would be too late if we don't go now."

"What's wrong?" Shi Zhong Tang smiled at her meekly, but his feet remained rooted to the spot.

"...We are like a fountain of youth in the eyes of the masked people!" Ning Ning's patience for him was running thin. She used to think that this man was casual and elegant, now she thought that he

was nothing but a nuisance! She told him about the candle analogy the Doorman had told her and concluded with, "In other words, if a masked person were to find us..."

Just as she said that, a masked person walked out from behind the doorman-less entrance. He looked like he was trying to escape. He reached his head out and looked to the left and right, his vision fell onto Shi Zhong Tang not far from him. He was slightly taken aback and shouted, "Damn! The person from last night is here again!"

The entrance was slammed shut, a lot of noise came from within the theater. Ning Ning seemed to have heard something heavy being dragged across the floor...They couldn't have blocked off the entrance right?

"Hehehe..."

Ning Ning slowly turned over and looked at the source of the laughter. She felt a wave of anger. "What's there to be pleased about?"

Shi Zhong Tang's shoulder trembled. "Hehehehe..."

I can't take this anymore! Whoever wants to save him can do it! I'm leaving!!

"Hey!" Shi Zhong Tang shouted from behind her, "You came looking for me even though you are scared. You actually quite like me, right?"

"Ptui!" Ning Ning shouted without turning back, "You can die as you please! I don't care about you anymore!"

"Although I wasted my trip here tonight, but..." Shi Zhong Tang put both his hands in his pockets. He followed behind her leisurely while beaming with joy, "To be able to see such a cute side of you, it was worth it!"

"Ptui! Ptui, again! Ptui-cough, cough, cough..." Ning Ning spat with too much force that she choked on her own saliva.

This mood carried over to the next day of filming.

< < Another Side > > .

This was the gist of the scene for the day.

Yang Guifei had body odour, Napoleon was short, everyone had their flaws no matter how beautiful or noble a person was. This was (even) more apparent for a normal person. During the journey for the search of the resurrection medicine, the perfect facade of Princess Ling Shan slowly faded, revealing a not-so-beautiful side of her.

"This wall is too dirty, you are not allowed to hang me on it."

"This inn is for low-class people, can't you go to a place with more elegance?"

"You're so dirty, you're not allowed to get close to me."

A person's patience had its limits, even if it was a smitten male lead.

"Then I will hold you."

"Apologies, we do not have enough funds anymore."

"...Enough."

Shi Zhong Tang suddenly stood up from the chair. He walked briskly to the side of the fire basin and unfurled the painting scroll in his hand. A sudden gust of wind blew past the basin, the flames in the basin danced about and almost burned the back of the painting.

"..."

"..."

After looking at each other for a moment, Shi Zhong Tang was the first to give in again, but he had not completely calmed down yet. He did not properly keep the painting like he usually would. He just placed it randomly at the side, on a spot of the table that still had some dirt.

The painting was halfway unfurled. Half of the person was showing, the anger on her face had not completely subsided. She stared at Shi Zhong Tang viciously.

As night came, Shi Zhong Tang was in deep sleep while lightly snoring.

The door was opened softly. The innkeeper and her wife came in with a dagger and a sack in each hand.

This inn actually robbed and killed its guests. The couple made business by renting out rooms in the day, then killing and robbing their customers at night.

The person within the painting watched coldly from the side. She only needed to shout to wake Shi Zhong Tang up, he would then be able to handle these two easily with his sword skills.

But why would she?

He would be better off dead, she would be free if he died...

The dagger was inching towards his neck, it looked like he was about to be slashed in the next second.

"Get up!" Ning Ning screamed.

Shi Zhong Tang suddenly opened his eyes. He easily took the dagger out of the person's hand, put it on the other's neck and slashed him.

The innkeeper grabbed his neck, but the bleeding would not stop. His mouth made gurgling sounds as he retreated without stopping.

"Husband!" The wife screamed, "Someone! Someone come quickly!"

Sound of footsteps came from the stairs, they didn't know whether it belonged to friends or foes.

Shi Zhong Tang leapt out of the window, sword in one hand and the painting in the other.

The night was boundless, where was the way forward?

Shi Zhong Tang stumbled as he escaped into an uninhibited alley. He tried to catch his breath as he leaned on the cold wall. He glanced to the side and saw a few torches going past the entrance of the alley. He breathed a sigh of relief as he touched his neck...There was a warm and moist spot.

The innkeeper had left a shallow cut on his neck. He would not have lived through the night if the cut had been any deeper.

He stroked his bloodstained finger as he slowly raised his head and asked, "Why did you wake me up just now?"

A snow-white figure stood in front of him in the pitch-black alley under the pitch-black night.

Ning Ning looked at him with a complicated expression, the snow-white pearl earrings started to sway in the night wind.

"Isn't it better to let me die?" He smiled at her. "If I die, you would be free."

The cameraman looked at Director Shi, Director Shi gave him the signal to continue.

This scene should have ended when the two of them looked at each other, but Shi Zhong Tang did not let it end, he added a line on his own accord. He then put his hand down, revealing his bleeding neck as he walked closer to Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked at him without being able to look away.

He could only raise his bloodstained hand that was not holding his sword. He slowly stroked her cheek, not looking away, he smiled from the bottom of his heart. "You can't bear for me to die."

The scene still ended with the two of them looking at each other, but this moment seemed to last forever. Not only were the gazes of the two of them fixed on each other, the gazes of the audience were fixed on them too. Many of them only came back to their senses when Director Shi shouted cut.

No, there was a person who had not come back to his senses.

Chen Guan Chao.

This person who had been dispirited for some time was now squatting beside Director Shi dully. The beer belly of Director Shi was too big, he could not see his feet when he looked down, in the end his belly bumped into Chen Guan Chao's head and both of them fell over.

Chen Guan Chao did not care about the fall at all, he sat on the ground with his eyes glued to the two actors as he muttered, "Why? Why does the way the two of them act today...feel completely different from yesterday?"

1This is a traditional performing art in Chinese comedy, and one of the most popular elements in Chinese culture. It is typically performed as a dialogue between two performers, or rarely as a monologue by a solo performer (similar to most forms of stand-up comedy in Western culture), or even less frequently, as a group act by multiple performers.

Chapter 51

51: Kissing Scene

"Shi Tou's specialty is not acting," Director Shi said, "it's guiding actors."

There was no one else around them. Director Shi looked at the young man who was trapped in his own talent in front of him, he planned to use this chance to wake the other up.

"You're not as good as him at this." Director Shi said, "You are always chasing your so-called perfect actress. The perfect person does not exist in this world. Could you not use more of your thoughts to do something a director should do? For example, giving guidance to the actors?"

Chen Guan Chao's face twitched, he refused to face the facts. "I have guided them..."

"This sucks', 'redo', 'change the actor', this is how you guide them? Haha." Director Shi slapped his belly once as he laughed, his belly made a *bam* as it was slapped.

Chen Guan Chao's face gradually turned red.

"We are directors, not decorations. Guiding the actors is also part of our job." Director Shi collected himself and looked at Chen Guan Chao seriously. "Let's take You Ling as an example. If it were up to you, how would you tell her to portray today's scene?"

Chen Guan Chao looked down and thought about it. After a while he looked up and said, "I will first go over the lines with her, then pinpoint how she should act in certain parts, tell her what kind of feelings and expressions I want her to portray."

There were film buffs in the world, there were also directing buffs. He quickly forgot everything around him and entered a world of his own. He took out the script he would always have with him, writing and drawing on it as he read through it.

First he wrote *weary* beside the line: "This wall is too dirty, you are not allowed to hang me on it."

"First you have to portray the weariness." Chen Guan Chao muttered as he wrote, "She was not complaining about the place, she

was complaining about the male lead, she wanted to break up with him."

Next, he underlined the thought monologue: 'He would be better off dead, she would be free if he died'.

"Then you portray hate." Chen Guan Chao muttered as he underlined the line, "The male lead is but a lonely gigolo to her, yet this plaything dares to force her, command her, even threaten her. She had never endured such humiliation, she wished that he would die."

His vision went down the script as his pen followed, he pointed at Princess Ling Shan's 'Get up'.

"Is this concern or love?" He furrowed his brow, scrawled and corrected himself for a while, hesitated for a long time before concluding, "It should be concern, she was not sure what her intentions were."

He got to the end of the scene, where Princess Ling Shan looked at the injured male lead with a complicated expression. Chen Guan Chao breathed a sigh of relief as he wrote *love* beside it, then showed the script that was full of his notes to Director Shi and smiled. "That should be it, you won't go wrong if you act according to how it is written here."

Director Shi sniggered, "You are theoretically correct, but not all actors would be able to take this in."

The confident smile on Chen Guan Chao's face stiffened.

"Every actor is different. You can guide some actors beforehand, some actors will need to be guided as they go along, some actors require more guidance, some actors require less guidance. You will need to let them feel it out themselves." Director Shi smiled as he continued, "Take You Ling as an example. She is the type that requires less (initial) guidance and will take in guidance as she goes along."

Director Shi took the script out of Chen Guan Chao's hands when he finished. He added a sentence at the end of the script and returned it to him. "Look at it again, look at what Shi Tou has done."

Chen Guan Chao took the script back and saw that Director Shi added the two lines Shi Zhong Tang ad-libbed.

'Isn't it better to let me die? If I die, you would be free.'

Chen Guan Chao looked at the first sentence silently for a while, until Director Shi came to his side and pointed out. "This line is what Princess Ling Shan was thinking about in her mind."

That seemed to have enlightened Chen Guan Chao, he quickly looked at the next line.

'You can't bear for me to die.'

"This line..." Chen Guan Chao muttered, "Is the answer in Princess Ling Shan's heart."

No wonder this scene felt completely different from yesterday. Because no matter if it was yesterday or the day before yesterday, the relationship between the male and female leads were shallow at best. But now Shi Zhong Tang had opened the door to Princess Ling Shan's heart with these two lines. He dug out the thoughts she had repeatedly refused to admit for her and the audience to see.

This could be considered the first time Princess Ling Shan showed her true feelings ever since they started filming. Of course it would be completely different from anything before. Not only was she surprised, the audience was also surprised, because Shi Zhong Tang's performance had an 'unveiling the truth' effect.

"You should learn from this." Director Shi patted the shoulders of Chen Guan Chao. "You still have a lot to learn. Stop obsessing over your < >."

Upon finishing the sentence, he childishly stuck his tongue out and told Chen Guan Chao. "The male lead of < > is better than you. At least he was obsessed over the painting of a beauty, why are you obsessing over a bunch of words you wrote?"

Chained to the past, chained to the person within the painting. Besides Chen Guan Chao, how many people in the world were like that as well?

The crew came to a standstill while the two of them were not around, they took this chance to take a break.

"We did pretty well on that scene." Shi Zhong Tang was wiping the fake blood off his neck with a towel while offering a clean one with his other hand. "Here."

Ning Ning's face still had fake blood on it. She reached out and grabbed the towel, then slowly wiped the blood off her face.

"What's up?" Shi Zhong Tang's vision fell upon her thighs, he smiled. "Studying for the next scene?"

Ning Ning was sitting on a chair with a pen behind her ear. She had a script opened on her thighs, it was cramped with an amount of notes comparable to Chen Guan Chao's.

The director was not the only person that had to figure out the thoughts of the character and think about how the character should be portrayed, the actors themselves have to put in the work as well. So if you were to find an empty script in the hands of an actor...apologies, you might have seen a fake script, or you might be looking at a fake actor.

"You disrupted my overall plans." Ning Ning said grumpily, but after puffing her cheeks for a while, she finally dishearteningly said, "...You're right, the scene looks better this way."

Shi Zhong Tang chuckled.

"I have my motives." He smiled, "Let's not talk about this scene anymore. We are about to start on the next one, my favourite scene."

The corner of Ning Ning's mouth twitched.

Next scene: kissing scene.

They were past the halfway point for the filming of < <The Person Within the Painting> >, next would be the second half. The conflicts would be getting more intense, Princess Ling Shan would also finally open up her heart and fall in love with the male lead who had been continuously wooing her.

But he died.

At the moment when she was finally revived, he died from a serious injury. At the moment she finally fell in love with him, he died.

This was a first love that ended the moment it began.

Shi Zhong Tang suddenly leaned onto Ning Ning, his movement was so conspicuous that the people around them looked towards their direction. Everyone smiled understandingly when they saw that it was the two of them, because everyone knew that Shi Zhong Tang was wooing Ning Ning, so they thought that this was another one of his tricks.

But that was far from the truth.

"... Are you alright?" Ning Ning looked up and saw that he was breaking out in cold sweat. She stood up and gave the seat to him. "Sit down, I will go get a doctor."

Shi Zhong Tang used his left hand to press down on Ning Ning's shoulder and pulled her back.

"I'm fine." He said with gritted teeth. He used a towel to cover his face, his muffled voice from behind the towel said, "Don't alarm the

others."

Ning Ning especially sympathised with him as she had gone through the same experience. She made sure not to alarm the others, she even...looked down at the back of her hand that was held within his hands, not pulling it out.

Her hand was very warm, while his were as cold as a dead man's hands.

"Don't go to that theater anymore." She reminded him again, "You're like this after one time, who knows if you will be able to get out of the bed if you were to go again."

Shi Zhong Tang covered the back of her hand with his left hand and asked softly, "...Then why did you go into the theater?"

"..." Ning Ning fell silent in the face of this question for a long time before she finally spoke, "I am an actor. But unlike you who is talented and could act as anything, there was a period of time where I could not act at all. I would look like a clown and could only make people laugh. Besides tossing myself into the theater, besides turning myself into another person again and again, I cannot think of another way to hone my acting skills."

Shi Zhong Tang put the towel down. He looked at her in surprise with his amorous eyes.

"...Why are you looking at me like that?" Ning Ning felt chills on her back, she could not help but rub her back on the chair.

"This is the first time you talked to me about yourself." Shi Zhong Tang's expression became gentler. "That's right, what's your name?"

Ning Ning raised her guard, "Why are you asking this?"

Shi Zhong Tang spoke in a coquettish way, "Tell me please."

Ning Ning raised her guard further. "What significance is there in knowing this?"

"It's significant to you." Shi Zhong Tang smiled in an even sweeter manner. He leaned his body on her, the two of them looked like swans with their heads close together. He said in a gentle voice, "In a foreign country, no, in another time and space, if a person calls you by your name, your real name...wouldn't you like it?"

"No." Ning Ning said resolutely.

She made up her mind to not let anyone know her real name, because the way Life Theater screened its movie was to first paste a

poster on its entrance. On the poster were the title of the movie and the name of the lead characters. You entered with a ticket if you were interested...So, telling someone your real name was a very scary thing, you wouldn't know if the other party would wait at the entrance for days upon days for your name to appear.

"...Are you scared?" Shi Zhong Tang tilted his head and looked at her with clear and bright eyes. He exposed her thoughts like how he exposed Princess Ling Shan's thoughts, "Are you scared that I will go search for you?"

Ning Ning looked up and stared at him, just like how Princess Ling Shan could only look at him without saying a word after she had been exposed.

This man had a kind of charm. He messed up Ning Ning's heart with a few words, he even caused confusion within Ning Ning's senses. It made her start to lose the ability to differentiate whether she was acting or not, unable to tell the difference between her and Princess Ling Shan.

She was becoming more and more like Princess Ling Shan.

She could not wait for him to die, but she could not bear for him to die either.

She was afraid of him wooing her, but she was also hoping for him to continue doing so.

"Alright, alright! Everybody get ready!" Director Shi interrupted by clapping his hands, he led a somewhat unhinged Chen Guan Chao back. "We will film the next scene!"

The next scene, the kissing scene.

Several swords came at him like a fish net.

Shi Zhong Tang welcomed them with a sword in hand, he weaved around the net of swords. The swords started to fall to the ground one by one as he passed by each of them, the assassins began to fall one by one along with them. In the end, he was the only one standing in the bamboo forest, everyone else was already lying in a pool of blood.

The green bamboo leaves, the tip of the sword which was dripping with fresh blood and the assassins dressed in white created a bright and magnificent scene in the camera.

Shi Zhong Tang closed his eyes as the sword fell from his hand, then he fell head first into the ground.

The night had already fallen when he reopened his eyes, there was a bonfire beside him. Beside it there was a woman in white, bright and clear like the full moon, lighting up the night.

The bonfire crackled, sparks danced in front of Shi Zhong Tang's face. He smiled weakly at Ning Ning. "I'm so tired."

Ning Ning looked at him without any expression.

"Give me a little reward." He looked at her gently and a little pitifully. "I'm so silly, wooing you without asking for anything in return...Give me a little reward, so that I can carry on..."

Ning Ning was slightly taken aback.

At the moment he looked at her that way, at the moment he said those words to her, her senses completely melded with Princess Ling Shan.

The surroundings started to become hazy, stalks of bamboo began to sprout from the ground one by one, spreading outwards from behind her. Director Shi had vanished, Chen Guan Chao had vanished, Mama had vanished, the cameras had vanished, everything vanished.

All that was left was a ground full of corpses and the two of them.

It was as if the reflection of the moon was rising out of the water, as if the flower within the mirror was blooming right in front of your eyes, the border separating the real world and the illusory world was gone, everything was like a dream.

Ning Ning sat down beside Shi Zhong Tang, she slowly brought him within her embrace.

He looked at her. The two of them had already spent many spring nights under the hibiscus canopy, yet he still looked at her with bewilderment and agitation; he seemed to not have expected that he could actually get anything in return from her.

Ning Ning could not help but find it funny.

She gently kissed his lips with a smile, it was like kissing the moon in the water, the flower in the mirror.

"You chasing after me..." She opened her eyes and looked down at him, "Caused me to not feel lonely anymore."

After the border was lost and the worlds were merged, the filming went even more smoothly.

The day was arriving quickly.

October 10, the end of filming for <<The Person Within the Painting>>.

Chapter 52

52: The Final Scene

It was the final scene for < < The Person Within the Painting > > .

The resurrection medicine was finally concocted after they went through countless hardships.

There was only one dosage of the medicine, but there were two people.

One was Princess Ling Shan who had been dead for a long time, the other was the male lead who was on the verge of death.

"Quickly take it." Shi Zhong Tang looked up at Ning Ning and said gently, "I've waited for this day for so long."

They had already escaped out of Yumen Pass¹, raging sands were blowing past them as a camel stood beside them, the bells on its neck were ringing in the wind which brought forth golden waves. Ning Ning sat on the golden sandy ground in her white dress, Shi Zhong Tang in her arms, she gently shook her head.

"You are still so stubborn even in this moment." His voice was getting softer, then he finally closed his eyes.

Ning Ning opened the bottle the moment his breathing stopped, and poured the contents into his mouth.

She stared at his eyes for a long while after the bottle was emptied, asking in a trembling voice, "Why is he not waking up?"

The Taoist Priest hemmed and hawed, spreading his hand out. "I've already told him, how could a resurrection medicine exist in this world?"

"What did you say?" Ning Ning was slightly taken aback. Unable to control her anger, she drew the sword out of Shi Zhong Tang's waist. She stood up and pointed the sword at the priest's neck. "You lied to him?"

"I did not lie to him!" The priest frantically took an ancient book out from his clothes. "This book was passed down by my ancestors, all the magic arts on it are real. If they weren't, you would not have

become the person within the painting..."

Ning Ning snatched the book out of his hands without waiting for him to finish. Upon closer inspection, it was indeed filled with all kinds of magic arts: the art of invisibility, the art of passing through walls, the art of person within the painting... and on the last page, the art of resurrection.

"...How can it be?" Ning Ning blanked out after looking at the art of resurrection, the book fell to the sandy ground from her hand.

The Taoist Priest leapt towards the book and picked it up. He murmured, "I've long told him it wouldn't work, but he wouldn't listen. *Sigh*, I told him a list of hard to get ingredients so he would give up, who knew he would actually collect all of them..."

A sword pierced his chest and blocked his unfinished words from leaving his throat. Ning Ning pulled the sword out of his back, turned over and looked at Shi Zhong Tang who was on the ground.

She slowly walked over then bent over and caressed his face.

It was strange. She used to feel annoyed whenever she saw this face, but now tears flowed down her cheeks and fell on it.

Ning Ning wiped the tears on her face. She looked down at the sword in her hand and slowly lifted the sword up like a demon. She placed it horizontally across her neck, then closed her eyes and slashed across forcefully—

The sword fell to the ground and kicked up some of the sand.

Ning Ning touched her bleeding neck with both hands and said with a trembling voice, "How can this be?"

A gust of wind blew past, the sound of the pages of a book flipping could be heard. She turned around and saw that the book of magic arts which was lying in the puddle of blood had been blown open by the wind, it was coincidentally opened at the last page. It seemed that because the book had been steeped in blood, words slowly appeared on the previously empty page.

Ning Ning could not help but laugh as she saw those words, but her laughter soon turned into tears.

The words that appeared under the art of resurrection was—

"If one were to desire immortality, discard the body and enter a painting."

"...Wait for a bit, Li Lang." Ning Ning coaxed Shi Zhong Tang, "I will

paint you right now, I will revive you right now..."

But with a turn of her head, she saw another line appeared in the book.

"Upon attaining immortality, one shall request nothing else from the world."

As the poem finished, the book burst into flames by itself.

"No!" Ning Ning leapt towards the book. She desperately tossed sand on the book, she even started using her hands in an attempt to put out the fire after panicking. But the book burned even faster, nothing was left but ash before her hands could feel hot.

The ashes were floating in front of her. Ning Ning knees buckled as she knelt on the floor and started crying in pain.

The book was gone, the priest was dead, no one else in the world knew about the art of the person within the painting. There was not even a person who knew how to kill her. She would live forever, she would be alone forever.

Ning Ning could not help but shiver after the thought set in.

A wave of unprecedented loneliness came over her.

She could not help but feel cold. She turned around and crawled towards Shi Zhong Tang, she cried as she sought warmth from him by bringing him into her embrace.

"Li Lang, I'm scared." She cried, "I'm not scared of death, I'm scared of living..."

Her cries echoed in the desert, as no one responded.

Her parents, her siblings, and now even Shi Zhong Tang had left her. She was the only person in the entire world who didn't want to live, but she would live forever.

"Passed!" Director Shi clapped his hands. "I hereby announce that the filming for < <The Person Within the Painting> > has officially ended!"

The cameramen tossed their hats skywards, the entire crew burst into joy.

The end of filming. This weighed on Ning Ning's mind, it made her feel unusually heavy.

"How are you going to celebrate tonight?" Shi Zhong Tang opened his eyes and asked her within her embrace as he smiled.

By waiting for your death. That was what Ning Ning was thinking, but she ended up asking him, "What are your plans?"

"Don't even try to celebrate alone." Director Shi walked over and told them, "Tonight we will have an end-of-filming banquet together!"

Director Shi was someone who constantly looked for an excuse to eat, how could he miss out on using the end of filming (celebration) as an excuse? Mountains of food and beverages were served. Director Shi was happily biting down on a pig's head, Wen Yu was beside him feeding him vegetables while constantly tugging on him.

Quite a number of people approached and clinked glasses with Ning Ning. Ning Ning smiled as she sipped on her drink. She dared not let herself get drunk, all her attention was on Shi Zhong Tang.

He was the same old Shi Zhong Tang, skipping and jumping about. He was displaying no signs of suicidal tendencies.

Even the little accident that happened didn't affect his mood.

A fan had mixed into the banquet and jumped onto him while screaming, "I love you, Tang Tang! I love you!"

Everyone was stupefied as they pulled her off him and shouted for security.

"You love me?" Shi Zhong Tang looked down. He looked at the female fan who was holding his waist tightly, unwilling to let go with a weird smile.

"Yes! Yes!" The fan looked up at him, her eyes full of infatuation.

"Will you love me in the future? Will you love me when I'm old? Will you love me when I grow a beer belly? Will you still love me after my hairline recedes? Will..." Shi Zhong Tang bombarded her with question after question, causing the fan to not know how to react.

The fan seemed to be shocked by his questions and would not even come back to her senses even as the security came to escort her out.

It was not just her, the others were also shocked by his reaction. They felt that it was too overbearing.

But most of the people did not take this incident too seriously, because he quickly reverted back to normal, talking and laughing with everyone else. He also toasted everyone. No one dared to turn him down because of his position in the crew...no one but Ning Ning.

So when most of the people were drunk beyond measure, she was still sober. As such, she quietly followed Shi Zhong Tang as he walked

out the door with his coat.

Shi Zhong Tang stopped in his tracks along the way and turned his face around as if he noticed her.

After Ning Ning hid behind a telephone pole, she looked at her high heels with furrowed brows. She thought that she would have already been found out, but he only paused for a while before continuing along his way.

She hesitated for a moment before following him again.

She followed him all the way to the entrance of Life Theater.

Shi Zhong Tang stopped in his tracks again. This time, he did not just turn his head, he walked towards Ning Ning's hiding spot. He caught her just as she was about to come out from behind the telephone pole and run, pulling and tugging her to the entrance of Life Theater.

"What do you want?" Ning Ning struggled in his embrace.

"I like you, especially after I knew you entered Life Theater for the sake of acting." He whispered in her ear, "Because I am the same."

Ning Ning was so shocked that she forgot to struggle. She looked up at him, "You? You find it useful?"

He was so talented, why would he need to enter Life Theater?

"I like acting, but I can't act forever. I cannot act as a young character when I'm old, I cannot act as a handsome character when I grow a beer belly, but I will definitely grow old and turn ugly one day." Shi Zhong Tang said with a smile, "You too."

"...It's the same for everyone." Ning Ning answered, "When that day comes, you can just retire."

"No." Shi Zhong Tang said without thinking. He rejected this plain and boring conclusion, his fiery gaze fell upon Life Theater. "If I had not met you, if I had not known about Life Theater, maybe I would have accepted that kind of ending, but now..."

Shi Zhong Tang turned around and looked behind him, he laughed. "I have a deal with him."

Him?

Ning Ning slowly turned back and immediately shivered.

A man in a smiling mask had appeared behind them out of nowhere and was now silently looking at them.

"...How did you two know each other?" Ning Ning suddenly remembered something after asking the question, her face turned a little pale. She looked up and stared at Shi Zhong Tang, "The ticket you had, don't tell me..."

"Yes, he gave it to me." Shi Zhong Tang admitted calmly.

"I warned you, you cannot accept a ticket from a staff member." Ning Ning's face turned dark.

"I accepted it, I changed the main character's fate." Shi Zhong Tang said without a care, "Twice."

As he said that, Smiling Mask walked over and raised his hands. His pale white palms were filled with tickets. Not only were there ordinary tickets, even-numbered designated tickets, and odd-numbered designated tickets, there were also a few tickets which Ning Ning had not seen before mixed in.

Shi Zhong Tang's eyes lit up. He let go of Ning Ning and took the tickets, then he presented the tickets to Ning Ning like a lover presenting flowers. He smiled childishly and said, "He would give me tickets after I help him change the fate of two main characters. With these tickets, we can act as different people every night, in different space and time, doing different things..."

Eventually, his expression turned gentle and serious. "Then fall in love with each other."

Ning Ning looked at the tickets in his hands, then slowly looked up towards him.

The passion and apprehension in his eyes washed into Ning Ning's eyes like waves.

This was the scariest and most moving way Ning Ning had ever seen someone profess their love.

"Heh..."

Who laughed?

Both Ning Ning and Shi Zhong Tang turned around and realised that it was Smiling Mask who laughed. As he was quietly laughing, the mask on his face suddenly cracked.

"Ugh..."

Who was in pain?

Ning Ning turned back and saw that Shi Zhong Tang was touching

his face. He furrowed his brows before slowly putting his hands down, he looked at Ning Ning with uncertainty. "What's wrong?"

Ning Ning looked at him and felt that it was difficult to breathe.

Because on his face was a small piece of a mask.

Shi Zhong Tang had felt the mask. He looked even more surprised than Ning Ning. He turned towards the Smiling Mask and shouted at him, "What's going on? What's this? This is completely different from what we agreed upon!"

"I'm sorry." As another piece of the mask cracked and fell, Smiling Mask revealed a frivolous mouth. He apologised insincerely, slyly smiling. "I lied to you."

Chapter 53

53: The Doorman

"Life Theater is an intriguing place." Smiling Mask looked to Life Theater to his side, he sighed deeply. "It has always been here, but not many people will notice it. Only those with despair and paranoia, those who are unresigned to their fates and have delusions of changing their fates can find it."

He turned back and smiled at Shi Zhong Tang and Ning Ning. "It will also only open its doors to these types of people."

After a moment of shock and anger, Shi Zhong Tang quickly calmed down and searched for a way to save himself.

"...It didn't find me, the one who found me was you." He had to clarify one thing first, thus he said coldly, "You lied to me. A person could only change the fate of a main character twice, but not thrice, right?"

Ning Ning was stunned, she looked at him helplessly.

Shi Zhong Tang had no concept of how many times one could change the fate of the main character, the source of his concept came from her—it was when she told him about the candle analogy! It was her who told him he could only change the fate of a main character twice!

If that was not the case.

Then the one who had lied to him...was her.

She was the accomplice of Smiling Mask!

"It's thrice." Smiling Mask said, then he smiled at the two of them, "Did both of you breathe a sigh of relief? Haha, don't worry. She is not my accomplice."

Both of them were stunned for a while, then their faces turned pale.

Smiling Mask was obviously experienced, Shi Zhong Tang attempted to probe him with words, he saw through it immediately, then used words to make fun of them.

"I admit defeat." Shi Zhong Tang gave in a little first, then flattered him thoroughly, "You're good. I still don't understand what I did

wrong. I only took two tickets from you, I only entered Life Theater twice, and I ended up like this. Good for you...not only did you get your wish, you even got a free facelift..."

Smiling Mask started sniggering, he seemed to have felt flattered.

This was good, this was good, the more he felt good about himself, the more he would let his guard down, the more questions he would be willing to answer.

"Boy, you were still playing with mud when I was using this trick." Smiling Mask ruthlessly destroyed his fantasy. "You don't have to play these tricks on me, you can ask whatever you want...before you completely become a masked person. Haha."

Shi Zhong Tang pursed his lips.

He originally only had a small piece of a mask on his right cheek, now the right side of his face was almost covered. The speed was not too fast nor too slow, it was like the torment experienced by a person at the execution ground with a noose around his neck, waiting for his turn.

"...Since everyone can change the fate of the main character twice." He touched his face, "Why did I end up like this? Why am I the exception?"

"You are no exception." Smiling Mask waved his fingers at Shi Zhong Tang. "Three. You've changed the fate of three masked people."

Shi Zhong Tang furrowed his brows, he suspected Smiling Mask's math was taught by a language teacher. He had to remind Smiling Mask again, "...I only took two tickets, I only entered Life Theater twice."

Smiling Mask glanced towards the direction of Life Theater.

A group of staff members had gathered at the entrance when no one was looking. They looked as if they were watching an outdoor movie, they silently watched the three of them while in high spirits.

"Every masked person has a ticket. You can watch what happened to them with that ticket, you can even change their fate." Smiling Mask laughed. "But there is one person who is the exception. Not only does the person not have their own ticket, their fate is also not allowed to be changed."

"...That person is me." He raised his right hand up to his chest and bowed gracefully to the two of them. "The Doorman of Life Theater."

"Former Doorman." A cold voice rang out from behind him.

Clop, clop, clop. The sounds of footsteps slowly emerged from the darkness. A mask full of flame patterns appeared behind him, he was wearing a white Chinese-style unlined upper garment¹ with a black waistband, it was the Doorman.

...So he was not the Doorman yet at this time.

"Congratulations." Smiling Mask turned and looked at him, the mask on his face slowly peeled off along with his movement. "You have been promoted. You will be able to replace me soon enough and become the official doorman."

A big hand reached out from in front of him and viciously pressed down on his face.

"...It's useless." Smiling Mask's voice came from behind the hand. "Based on the rules of the theater, I am already free. You have no power to punish me. You should actually thank me. I would have left long ago if not for the fact that I wanted to leave a few words for you."

The Doorman did not care. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.* If he could not use the powers Life Theater bestowed him to punish Smiling Mask, he would use his own power to punish him. The grip from his hand was getting stronger, he wanted to squish Smiling Mask's head!

Smiling Mask was unable to bear it any longer.

Smiling Mask knew the Doorman well. The latter would not listen no matter how glib you were with him, he would only laugh if you were to beg, so Smiling Mask might as well laugh first.

"Hah, I would never have thought that someone would want this position." He said mockingly, "Watching the entrance forever without being able to leave it a single step no matter rain or shine, just like a guard dog, what do you seek?"

The Doorman ignored him.

"Oh, you seek revenge." Smiling Mask suddenly started laughing, ruthlessly and craftily. "But who would you seek revenge upon? So many years have passed by, your enemy would have already died of old age..."

"He has sons! Grandsons!" The Doorman interrupted him coldly, "I will wait here endlessly, until the day his descendant walks in!"

"So what if that happens? Can you exact your revenge then?" Smiling Mask's words were like knives stabbing his heart. "Would your

daughter come back to life after you have your revenge? She will never come back to life, you will also never leave this place, unless you defect like me. But with me as a precedent, would the theater even give you a chance? Hahahaha!!"

His laughter and the Doorman's angry shouts echoed behind Ning Ning. She took a glance at them before she continued to help Shi Zhong Tang escape.

The streets were long and dark, streetlights lined both sides of them.

The streetlights did not illuminate a large area, they only shone in a white circle underneath it, like a spotlight on a stage. Ning Ning helped Shi Zhong Tang along the lights, their figures were swallowed by darkness for a moment before appearing under the light.

"...I should have expected it." The process of forming the mask seemed to be very painful, the pain seemed to be increasing as more parts of the mask formed. Shi Zhong Tang put a hand on Ning Ning's shoulder and placed his other hand on the mask. He breathed heavily. "Changing a person would affect the people around him. What would the remaining swindler think if the two other swindlers manage to escape? What would he do? He would definitely become vigilant..."

He suddenly turned and looked at Ning Ning. The mask had already covered more than half his face. It was a very good looking mask, the texture was that of a jade.

"Do you still remember the news I showed you before? Three years ago, three swindlers, a huge amount of money, all of them died in the end. I transmigrated as two of them and changed their fates. In the end, all three of them survived, but the last person went missing." He told her, "If I'm not wrong, the person in the smiling mask is the third swindler, who is also the mastermind. His name is... Pei Xuan."

After he said those two words, he suddenly wailed mournfully. He knelt on the ground and shivered non-stop.

Ning Ning looked at him from the side, her heart was extremely conflicted. She did not know if she should help him, she also did not know how to help him.

Shi Zhong Tang shouted in pain for a very long time before his shivers slowly stopped. He took very deep breaths while holding his face with both hands.

"...Dad always nags at me, telling me not to be rash, to consider the worst case scenario first." He let out a laugh. "But I'm afraid if I take

too long, you would already have left."

He slowly put both his hands down and turned his face over.

A complete mask had covered his face.

With the texture of jade, smooth and shiny, it looked like someone had used a brush and dipped it on a peach flower which was growing on a branch, acquiring the brightest of red and gently brushing the tops of his eyes.

Thus the jade mask which originally made him look like a straight-laced gentleman had a burst of glamour added to it.

"That is why I don't regret it." He got up and walked towards Ning Ning, but stopped short in front of her.

Ning Ning was enveloped under a beam of white light which was shining down from the street light, she was standing in the light as he was standing outside of it.

"Because if you were to let me choose again, I would definitely have made the same choice." Shi Zhong Tang laughed out. "Did you know? <<The Person Within the Painting>> was the happiest movie shooting for me. At the end, I even felt that I was Li Lang in my past life and you were Princess Ling Shan in your past life. We could meet in this lifetime because we could not be together in our previous lives."

Ning Ning looked at him sadly, her heart felt a wave of irrepressible desolation. It would be nice if a person didn't know what love was. If you didn't know love, you wouldn't know hate. If you didn't know love, you wouldn't know loneliness. And you wouldn't make a mistake and ended up in the state you are today.

"I am Shi Zhong Tang in this lifetime, you are You Ling. We could not be together yet again, so we would meet in another lifetime." Shi Zhong Tang asked with a smile, "At that time...what would your name be?"

"...Ning Ning." Ning Ning told him softly after remaining silent for a moment, "My name is Ning Ning."

He looked at her with surprise. He seemed to have not expected to actually get anything in return.

"Ning Ning..." He softly called out her name a few times. Suddenly he started laughing out loud, "Don't tell me you believe in my nonsense? I lied to you."

"I don't like you."

"I only like a thrilling and adventurous life."

"I would have gone to the theater without you, is there a place that is more thrilling than it?"

"I would have eventually ended up as a masked person without you..." Shi Zhong Tang reached out and touched her face. His expression had an unprecedented gentleness and pain. "...so don't cry, it's not your fault."

Am I crying? Ning Ning touched her face, it was wet.

She looked at her fingers with surprise. She abruptly pulled his arm. "Let's go, we are escaping."

The moment she decided to burn her life for the second time, a ball of flames lit up behind Shi Zhong Tang. An arm then reached out from behind him and grabbed the mask on his face, forcefully pulling it to the side—

The Doorman tore Shi Zhong Tang's mask off his face right in front of Ning Ning.

The moment the mask was torn, the whole world seemed to have frozen. The moths fluttering underneath the lamps froze, the broken bottles rolling in the wind froze, the woman who was bringing in her clothes on the balcony froze. The whole world fell silent, as if doomsday had come.

Only the Doorman could move. He slowly turned around with the mask in hand. He was full of resentment and hate, but those feelings seemed to disappear the moment he saw Ning Ning.

He had officially become the doorman of the theater and had attained the power the doorman should have. He blinked, then he blinked again. Finally, he stared at Ning Ning without moving his eyes. "You are..."

1Example photo of the clothes

Chapter 54

54: Eternal First Love

"You are..."

His voice was drifting further and further away...

His figure was drifting further and further away...

The world was closing in on the sides, turning it narrow and dark, seemingly like the curtains of a stage, closing in a quiet ceremony.

Ning Ning opened her eyes.

She was sitting in the audience seat of the theater, the opening theme had just ended. <<The Person Within the Painting>> had just started screening on the snow-white screen.

Shi Zhong Tang was standing in the wooden cloister, he watched as Ning Ning and Wen Yu left, then he looked down and opened the sketchbook Wen Yu had left behind.

The drawing of Ning Ning had yet to take form. The wisteria flowers and the pillars beside her were all outlined, peeking out from behind the pillar was an indistinct mask.

Shi Zhong Tang turned his head and took a look. Behind a pillar in the cloister not far from him, a smiling mask was peeking out, saying with a smile, "Let's strike a deal."

Smiling Mask took a movie ticket out. There was a stamp on it, in which there was the portrait of a man.

"Help me save this man," Smiling Mask said, "and I will tell you her secret—the secret of why she refuses to accept you."

Ning Ning could not help but mutter at this moment, "Don't do anything stupid."

On the screen, Shi Zhong Tang reached out and accepted the movie ticket.

She watched as he entered the theater, watched as the poster slowly changed, watched as the title changed from <<Fraud>> to <<Escaped>>, then he stumbled out of the theater and suddenly fell on to the floor while vomiting.

With the first ticket, he changed the fate of Zhou Ai Guo the swindler.

He also found out Ning Ning's secret.

"Tell me." He laid on the bed, as he held the hand of the girl who was beside him. His smile was a little desolate. "Is my life but a two-hour movie to you?"

Ning Ning raised her hands to wipe her tears. She abruptly stood up from her seat and walked towards the masked person who was closest to her.

Just like last time, they had already rushed over before the movie even ended. It was as if she was the fountain of youth and there would be none left if they were late.

The movie was still playing behind her, she walked past the masked people one by one.

"That's right, what's your name?"

It's not you. She walked past a person wearing a scholar mask.

"Tell me please."

It's not you. She walked past a person wearing a crying mask.

"It's significant to you. In a foreign country, no, in another time and space, if a person calls you by your name, your real name... wouldn't you like it?"

It's not you either. She walked past a person wearing an old farmer's mask.

Smiling Mask appeared on the movie screen behind her once again.

"Let's strike another deal." He took out another ticket. "Help me save another person, I will teach you how to get her to stay."

Shi Zhong Tang looked down at the ticket. It was another movie ticket with a stamp showing a portrait within, he did not accept it this time.

"Why are you hesitating?" Smiling Mask asked.

Shi Zhong Tang, "A person could at most change the fates of two main characters right?"

Smiling Mask, "That's right."

Shi Zhong Tang, "My body deteriorated after changing one, I was

thinking if I would get early dementia, turn bald and grow a beer belly if I change two."

Smiling Mask, "Haha, it won't be that scary."

Shi Zhong Tang, "Then why don't you do it yourself?"

"...I can't." Smiling Mask answered honestly, "To be honest, I am the original doorman of the theater. Once one were to take up this position, they would never be able to leave it. Any normal person wouldn't be able to take it, right? So I want to escape. Now the reserve doorman is pursuing me to the ends of the world, I dare not return. He would tear my face off immediately."

Shi Zhong Tang, "...That sounds a little scary, are you guys some kind of underground evil corporation?"

"Hahaha." Smiling Mask seemed to find him funny. He asked after laughing for a while, "Then are you doing it or not?"

Shi Zhong Tang fell silent for a long time.

"...Why not?" In the end, he started laughing.

The movie narrated his thoughts the moment he accepted the movie ticket.

"If life and death is what comes between Princess Ling Shan and Li Lang, then what comes between me and her would be, time..."

Is life and death harder to overcome, or is time harder to overcome?

Ning Ning stopped in front of a person.

This person had a tall stature, he was wearing the clothes of an ancient swordsman. She had a hard time finding him as he was mixed in within a crowd of people. She slowly reached out and attempted to remove the jade mask on his face.

But she could not.

"How can this be?" Ning Ning was unwilling to give up.

"...That's enough." Shi Zhong Tang's voice sounded out from behind the mask. He held her hand and smiled at her. "We meet again, that is enough for me."

Was this enough? He became a masked person who would be chained to the movie theater for eternity. To everyone else, to his relatives and friends, he was already dead. Furthermore, the cause of his death was suicide.

Ning Ning looked at him dully for a long time, suddenly she reached her hand out. "Ticket."

Shi Zhong Tang, "Hmm?"

Ning Ning held back her tears. "Give me your ticket."

Shi Zhong Tang looked at her for a long time, before he started to laugh. "Not giving."

"Give it!"

"Not giving!"

"Give it to me!!"

Shi Zhong Tang suddenly pressed down on Ning Ning shoulders and spun her around on the spot, making her face the screen. He was like a boyfriend who was watching a movie with his girlfriend, holding her from behind, telling her intimately, "Look."

On the screen, Shi Zhong Tang entered the theater for the second time.

The second ticket.

The second time he changed the fate of a main character.

He immediately fell face first on the ground when he came out, he started convulsing as if he had epilepsy. A female passerby took the long way around him. What a coincidence, that was the woman who had said she loved him at the banquet. He didn't even need to wait for him to turn old and bald, she couldn't even recognise him now, she did not even dare to get near him.

"Woah, why is it this scene." Shi Zhong Tang frantically raised his hands to cover Ning Ning's eyes. "Don't look, don't look, let's wait for the next scene."

"Give me the ticket." Ning Ning's tears made his fingers wet. "I want to change your fate."

"...It's fine." Shi Zhong Tang pressed his chin on her head and laughed softly. "I'm doing very well now."

Ning Ning, "Liar! What's so good about turning into a masked person!"

"I'm not lying." Shi Zhong Tang looked at the screen, he watched himself as she kissed him on the screen and smiled. "After becoming a masked person, my movie has been screening continuously. Also, they gave me special privileges because I was tricked into this. Besides

having the ability to enter the movies like the other masked people, I am also allowed to watch them from the audience seats."

"...But I very much prefer entering the movie." His voice was slowly turning gentle, like music slowly flowing out of the keys of a piano. "I can see Dad and little brother. I can act. I can meet you. I can fall in love with you again and again. Haha, now that I think about it, I really profited from it. Everyone else could only experience first love once, but I have already experienced it twelve times..."

"Wouldn't it be fine if you just give me your ticket!" Ning Ning would not let it go. "I can get you out of this place. You would be able to meet your father and brother. You can continue acting. You can...can meet me..."

"...If that happened, I would become an almost air-dried old man." Shi Zhong Tang said softly, "The me in that scenario would not be able to make you the most blissful woman in the world, so this is good enough..."

Was this really good enough? Living for an eternity, forever repeating his past life.

"...Isn't it painful?" Ning Ning turned around.

"It's not painful." The mask covered his expression, but even if he was showing his face, this talented actor must be pretending to be very happy. He was afraid that she wouldn't believe him so he repeated himself, "It's not painful."

He hugged her tightly as he said that.

A pair of arms slowly climbed up his spine, Ning Ning hugged him back tightly as well.

The two of them hugged on the screen, the two of them hugged outside of the screen as well. It looked like the reflection in the water, the reflection in the mirror...in the end everything was but the moon in the water, the flower in the mirror.

Time had frozen this love and stored it in the past.

This was a first love that bloomed but would never be able to bear any fruit.

Clop, clop, clop. Footsteps slowly approached them from a distance. The two of them looked towards the sound, it was the Doorman.

He looked coldly at Shi Zhong Tang, clenching and cracking his fingers by the side of his body, making a threatening display. He

looked like he would tear the mask off Shi Zhong Tang's face again.

"Ah! Father-in-law!" Shi Zhong Tang addressed him loudly.

Poof! The Doorman's head started to emit smoke, his mask started to light up with fire.

"I did not break the rules, you cannot burn me." Shi Zhong Tang pushed Ning Ning from behind as he laughed. "Go."

Ning Ning stumbled and fell into the Doorman's embrace.

The Doorman protected her like a mother hen protecting its chick, the only thing that was missing was him running out of the theater with her in his mouth. He pulled and tugged Ning Ning out of the door and lectured her with exasperation along the way out.

"I told you, do not get close to that man. He is a playboy! None of what he says are true! They are all exaggerations. Exaggerations!!"

"You do not have to feel sorry for him either, he would have been swindled into the theater ever since he was targeted by Pei Xuan. It didn't matter if you were involved!"

"He dared address me as father-in-law, this old man will burn him to death, burn him to death..."

"Papa." Ning Ning cried out softly.

The Doorman's rage burnt out, his fiery mask had returned to its original state.

The snow-white mask.

The mask was incomparable to Shi Zhong Tang's mask, it was an inferior five dollar mask from a mask stall.

Ning Ning looked at the mask. How could she have forgotten? Boss Qu had once bought the same mask from a mask stall and put it on his face then laughed as he said to her, "Alright, now we are the same."

"You are Boss Qu, right?" Ning Ning stared at him and said, "You are Papa, right?"

"I!" The Doorman was suddenly very agitated, the word 'I' escaped his mouth, he trembled for a moment before saying with difficulty, "...I am not."

"You definitely are!" Ning Ning started crying. "Don't lie to me, you definitely are!"

The Doorman did not know what to do with his hands. He helped

wipe her tears with his sleeve continuously, he trembled as he did so and said, "What's good about Boss Qu? He is so old, he is so evil, he did so many bad things..."

"But he is helping me wipe my tears right now." Ning Ning suddenly grabbed his sleeve and looked at him with her reddened eyes. "Besides, you can choose not to be evil. You don't have to do so many bad things...Papa, give me your ticket!"

The Doorman—which was to say Boss Qu—stiffened. He seemed to have woken up from a nice dream. Reality was very cruel, it made his body feel cold.

"...I don't have a ticket." He said deeply.

"No, you're lying again!" Ning Ning stared at him, but she realised with disappointment and sadness that this was different from just now, he did not look like he was lying.

"...Everyone has a ticket, except for the doorman. You can save everyone, except for the doorman." Boss Qu said coldly, "Besides, I don't need saving. I want to stay here. I want revenge!!"

Chapter 55

55: The Person Within the Painting

"Who are you exacting revenge on?" Ning Ning stared at him. "No matter if it's Chen Jun Yan or Li Xiu Lan, they are dead...but we are still alive!"

"Ha!" Boss Qu let out a mocking laugh. He looked down at his hands. "Does this count as living?"

Ning Ning could not answer.

"...You don't need to say anymore." He slowly raised his head, his eyes were burning with the fires of vengeance. "They might be dead, but their descendants are still around. I will wait for their arrival, I will get my revenge! No one will stop me!"

"But..." Ning Ning reached out to him.

"You can't stop me either!" Boss Qu shouted at her. He was the first to flinch after shouting at her, he said helplessly, "Sorry, Papa didn't mean to scare you..."

"Papa..." Ning Ning took a step towards him.

He was the one who frantically took a step back instead, reaching his hands out to stop her. "Stay away, stay away..."

He calmed down after much difficulty. He looked up, then with the cold voice and attitude that he showed when they first met, like a weathered guardian lion, like a skeleton leftover from a burning corpse, he told her coldly, "I am not your father. Patron, the movie has ended, you should go home."

Afterwards, he would not respond no matter how hard Ning Ning cried or begged.

Ning Ning could only impatiently leave while crying. She suddenly turned back and looked at him after taking a few steps.

"Papa...I am not your real daughter." She said tearfully while choking, "But I was once Qu Ning'er. I was your daughter. I truly...truly treated you as my father. Perhaps that world was fake, but my feelings were true!"

Boss Qu's eyes twitched, but he remained silent.

"I... I don't even know what I can do." She looked down at her hands and laughed bitterly. "I'm clumsy, I'm not smart, I don't know any important figures, I don't have any skills..."

She slowly gripped her hands, her soft and weak fingers coming together to form a powerful fist.

"...But I still want to give it a shot." She looked up at him, "I want to try to...save you and Shi Tou Ge."

In the end, she looked at him deeply, wiped her tears and left alone.

It was not until her back view completely vanished that Boss Qu started to tremble. Suddenly, he shouted loudly, turned around and viciously hammered the entrance of Life Theater.

His fist was so heavy that it was enough to kill a person with a single punch.

But when he hammered the entrance of Life Theater, it was like hitting the surface of water. It only created a ripple. Once it dissipated, the surface of the water reverted to a state of calmness.

The only thing that was not calm, was the person.

Ning Ning was sitting in the taxi on the way home. She took out her mobile phone and stared at the screen for a long time, before sending Wen Yu a text on WeChat: [Can I ask you a personal question?]

She breathed out after she sent the question and held her mobile phone to her chest. It was getting late, she wondered if he would see the text. Even if he did, who knew if he would be willing to reply to it.

Wen Yu replied in the next second.

Wen Yu: [What is it?]

Ning Ning wrote and rewrote the next text a few times before finally sending: [Is your brother really dead?]

This time, Wen Yu did not reply even after a long while.

She decided to depend on herself. Once she arrived at home, Ning Ning switched on her computer and started to search frantically for any news of Shi Zhong Tang. It was strange. Although the news reported that he committed suicide, it did not state how he actually killed himself. Some articles stated that he died by breathing in gas, others stated that he committed suicide for love.

The public was divided as to whom the object for his love was. Some people suggested that it could be his partner for his final movie, You Ling.

You Ling...

Ning Ning clicked on the name.

A video of an interview of You Ling when she was young popped out. The interview took place after <<The Person Within the Painting>> had started screening. Ning Ning skipped most of the video before stopping at a particular question from the host.

The host asked with a smile, "<<The Person Within the Painting>> was a huge success, it was dubbed the best movie with dual female leads in ten years. Be it the ruthlessness of Yan Hong Xiu or the elegance of Princess Ling Shan, they were equally memorable."

You Ling answered with a smile, "Thank you."

Host, "People were calling you a vase before this movie, haha, actually there's nothing bad about being a vase, at least you can make a living relying on your appearance. I, too, feel happy looking at you. Alright, let's return to the main topic, could you tell us how you have your breakthrough in acting to portray a classic character like Princess Ling Shan?"

You Ling, "I actually don't know either."

Not only was the host shocked, Ning Ning was also shocked.

The footage was blurry as the video was very old, but the puzzled look on You Ling's face could be seen clearly. She said, "Actually I had been acting as per usual, but I suddenly had a feeling...it was like, like a feeling of receiving assistance from God, so I managed to act well."

Host, "Can you be a bit specific? For example, how did you act in the final death scene?"

"Just like that." You Ling gesticulated, but her gestures were vague, when she was asked for details she would just laugh. "Ah, I don't remember the specifics clearly."

The bullet chat2 was accusing her of acting dumb, innocent and cute. Ning Ning on the other hand looked at her blankly as she was sweating cold bullets.

Memories were beautiful, like those with Papa. Memories were bitter, like those with Shi Zhong Tang. But sometimes memories could be chilling, like those of You Ling.

Her situation reminded Ning Ning of some people—authors, artists and other ordinary people in life—who were abruptly inspired. As if God was giving them a helping hand, being able to write or draw a masterpiece they usually wouldn't be able to, being able to do something they would usually absolutely would not be able to.

Within these people, exactly how many of them broke through because of inspiration? How many of them broke through because of accumulated experience? And how many of them were like You Ling? The bystanders said that she did it, she also strongly believed that she did it herself, but her memory of the specifics were blurry at best. She could not give a clear explanation even after trying to find words to do so for a long time. Finally, she could only sum it up with—it was like God had assisted me.

"...Phew..." Ning Ning could not help but lean back onto her chair. *Ring, ring.* Her mobile phone suddenly started ringing. She frantically took it out to take a look at who was calling her this late into the night.

The name on the screen gave her a shock.

Wen Yu.

The phone continued to ring for four more times before Ning Ning answered.

"Hello." She said.

Wen Estate, study room.

Rows of bookshelves stood up against the walls, like silent guards protecting scrolls upon scrolls of secrets.

"Sorry for troubling you so late into the night." Wen Yu held his mobile phone while standing in front of a bookshelf, his other hand was holding a sketchbook.

"It's fine, it's fine." Ning Ning laughed, then she carefully asked him, "Do you have any business with me?"

"I do." Wen Yu looked down at the sketchbook in his hand, looking at what was on it. "Are you free tomorrow?"

The next day, the restaurant.

It was the restaurant they were familiar with. It was still the same pianist from the other day, he was still playing the song from the other day < < You Flow in My Memory Forever > > — < < River Flows in You > > .

"Sorry." Ning Ning sat on the sofa chair, her body sank into the softness of the chair. "For being late."

"It's fine." Wen Yu still had the air of a marble angel. Lofty, awe-inspiring and inviolable. "Would you like a drink?"

"Lemon water, thank you." Ning Ning ordered something different from him this time.

A glass of lemon water and milk were served.

Ning Ning took a sip from her glass and asked, "Why did you ask to meet?"

A sketchbook was presented in front of her.

Upon taking a look at the familiar sketchbook, Ning Ning's eyelids twitched. She looked up at him. "And this is?"

"The question from last night." Wen Yu looked at her and said blandly, "Ask me again."

Ning Ning stared at him silently for a long time.

"Did your brother really die?" In the end, Wen Yu repeated the question himself. "I did not answer you, because I suddenly realised that I am not able to give you a clear answer."

His voice deepened as he closed his eyes, "...This is really strange. This is such an important matter. Why is my memory so hazy whenever I try to recall it?"

"Maybe it's because you were still young." Ning Ning told him.

"I can still remember the exam questions from the time I was in elementary school, there is no reason for me to forget such an important matter." Wen Yu looked up at her.

Ning Ning choked. She spun the glass in her hands silently before suddenly asking, "What do you remember?"

"I remember that my brother committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in a sealed room. He was smiling when his body was discovered. The smile on his face was very weird, I had never seen him smile that way. It looked like another person, like a mask that was forcefully put on. I did not dwell on it too much at first." Wen Yu suddenly opened the sketchbook and turned it over to show Ning Ning. "Until I discovered this."

On the old sketchbook, there were a few yellowed papers. Wen Yu's sketches of the crew of <The Person Within the Painting> were

on them.

The drawing of Ning Ning had yet to take form, the wisteria flowers and the pillars beside her were all outlined, peeking out from behind the pillar was an indistinct mask—a suspicious smiling mask.

"Ning Ning, you once asked me." Wen Yu stared at her from behind the sketchbook, probing at her eyes, probing at every change in her expression. "You asked me, if anyone weird appeared in the crew at that time."

Ning Ning shifted her vision from the book onto his face.

They looked into each other's eyes, Wen Yu asked in a deep voice, "...Do you know something?"

Not good...

Wen Yu, "Do you know who this masked person is?"

Stop it...

Wen Yu suddenly threw down the sketchbook and slammed the table with his white gloved hands. He leaned forward and gazed at her deeply while asking, "Where is this masked person now? How do I find him?"

Ning Ning stared at him blankly, because the way he was looking at her now was too cold.

Because the way he was looking at her now was too much like his brother.

People with such eyes would definitely search fervently for that place, that place would also take notice of them.

...Life Theater...

1Chinese or Imperial guardian lions are a traditional Chinese architectural ornament.

2Bullet Chatting refers to comments or an annotation floating over the video in certain way at a specific point of time of the video.

Chapter 56

56: Girlfriend Impersonator

At this moment, a mobile phone rang.

It wasn't Ning Ning's, it was Wen Yu's.

"Hello." He answered the call, greatly aghast. "What did you say?"

Afterwards, he ran out of the door without waiting for the other party to finish, he did not even bother to take his coat and book with him. Ning Ning frantically collected those things and chased after him.

"I will be right there." Wen Yu hung up as he opened the car door.

The car door on the other side opened as Ning Ning sat in the car as well.

Wen Yu turned around and looked at her, she turned around and looked at Wen Yu.

"I helped you with these." She hugged the coat and book tightly. She did not intend to return them at all, because they were the only excuse for her to stay by his side. "...Incidentally,... incidentally, I can accompany you, you don't look so good at the moment."

Wen Yu looked at her deeply before turning back, he simply said, "Put on your seatbelt."

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief and put on her seatbelt.

...She quickly found out why he said that...

It was not an act of chivalry, nor was it a passing remark, because Wen Yu then drove at a life threatening speed. It was to the extent that Ning Ning had to crawl out of the car after it stopped at the hospital.

Wen Yu rushed into a ward and was slightly out of breath as he had run almost the whole way there. He shouted, "Father."

"You're here." Director Shi looked at him with a smile.

Ning Ning entered behind Wen Yu. She recognised Director Shi with one look. Although he had turned old and fat and was spread out on the bed like a blanket, his smile looked exactly the same as it was those many years ago, thus she addressed him very naturally,

"Director Shi."

Director Shi shifted his vision onto her, his eyes brightened the moment he saw her holding on to Wen Yu's coat and book. He raised his eyebrows at Wen Yu. "Little rascal, you're finally willing to let me meet your girlfriend."

Ning Ning had just walked over. She almost retreated backwards when she heard those words, but Wen Yu reached out and grab her fingers.

She turned to look at him, and saw that he was pleading her with his eyes.

"...Yes, Uncle." Ning Ning slowly turned back and smiled at Director Shi, "He brings me here to meet you."

"Good. Good, good, good." Director Shi was so overwhelmed with joy, all he could say was 'good'.

At this moment, the doctor came looking for Wen Yu. Director Shi urged him, "Go, go. Both of you go out, I want to talk to this little girl."

Director Shi immediately activated parent interrogation mode after Wen Yu left the room. "How long have you known Little Yu?"

Ning Ning, "...It's been a while."

Director Shi, "Little Wen is someone who doesn't really know how to please a girl. What did you see in him?"

"He...he is cold on the outside but is warm inside." Ning Ning gave it a thought, "He doesn't really know how to say anything nice, but if anything were to happen, he would be the first to extend a helping hand."

"Haha, he is exactly that sort of person." Director Shi laughed heartily, "He is very reliable at critical moments. Please ask for as much help from him as possible, be it repairing your computer, your car, your phone..."

Ning Ning, "..."

Wen Yu, what have you been doing these years? Why have your job scope expanded to repairing mobile phones?

"Besides, all he does is work and more work. Money is but a number in his bank account, help him spend some of it." Director Shi continued to ramble on, "Let him accompany you on shopping trips, buy some clothes and bags. If he doesn't have the time, you can go on

Taobao1, then make him pay for your cart..."

...Are you his dad or my dad! Ning Ning wiped her sweat and said, "No, it's fine. I don't really buy many things."

"Sigh." Director Shi sighed again, " Besides being rich, he doesn't have any other good points. If you don't spend his money, how do you usually spend time together?"

Ning Ning did not know why Director Shi viewed Wen Yu in such a way, but she decided to defend him and said, "I watch him draw."

Director Shi, "Oh?"

"He draws really well." Ning Ning said, "He has a unique style of drawing, it's especially impactful. I like watching him draw."

"...The way you two spend time is very old-fashioned. It's like something people from my generation would do." Director Shi said with a laugh, "Although romance is nice, you would still need life's necessities. Who's the one who usually cooks? Whose preference do you guys cook for?"

"We take turns to cook." Ning Ning answered, "We don't cook for one of our preferences. We have similar preferences, we both prefer something more bland. Sometimes, we make potatoes with roasted beef...also, we try not to use any coriander for our dishes."

Before she could finish, the door opened behind her.

Ning Ning shut her mouth when she heard Wen Yu walked over. He reached out and gave her shoulder a pat. "You have to work. You can make a move first, I'll stay behind and accompany Father."

"Alright." Girlfriend Impersonator Ning Ning went along with the flow. She handed over the things in her hands to him, then waved goodbye to Director Shi. "Goodbye, Uncle."

Once Ning Ning left, Wen Yu had just pulled a chair for himself when he heard Director Shi laughing across from him, "Your little girlfriend is quite nice. What does she do?"

Wen Yu was taken aback, he answered, "Actress."

Director Shi might be in the same industry, but he did not like the idea of having a daughter-in-law from the industry. Just as Wen Yu thought this would be the end of the conversation, Director Shi exclaimed and continued asking, "What had she acted in? What hobbies does she have besides acting?"

How would Wen Yu know. "..."

Director Shi looked at him for a while before switching to another question. "You two take turns cooking, right? What does she like to eat?"

Wen Yu, "..."

"How do you not even know this?" Director Shi furrowed his brows. "Aren't you failing too badly as a boyfriend?! She knows everything about you, including your likes and dislikes. How can you be so uncaring towards her?"

Wen Yu was stunned.

On the other hand, Ning Ning originally wanted to go home immediately after leaving the hospital, but her manager Li Bo Yue gave her a call, there was really a job for her.

"<<The Great Empire>>?" Ning Ning asked doubtfully, "Didn't this show already start filming?"

Not only had the filming started, it had a lot of hype. It was a big show adapted from a popular web novel, it was heavily funded and very ambitious, the few leading actors in the show were all highly popular new generation of actors and actresses, preparing to charge at the summer release slot for the year.

"A position opened up." Li Bo Yue told her.

"What position?" Ning Ning asked.

"Second female lead, Princess Qing Luan." A flashy red sports car stopped in front of her, its window wound down. Li Bo Yue said to her from behind the window, "We'll talk on the car."

Li Bo Yue explained the details of the character to her on the way to the crew.

"Princess Qing Luan, the male lead's first love, her position in the show is that of the most beautiful woman." Li Bo Yue said as he drove, "Which is also your strength—a vase."

Ning Ning looked at the documents in her hands. She could not help but sigh in her heart.

Beautiful looks, born of nobility, elegant bearing...

This character had a lot of similarities with Princess Ling Shan.

Actually, most of the vase roles were extremely similar—their biggest use was to shine in front of the camera with their looks and curves, it was no different from a vase used to decorate a room.

"But I can do better than that." Ning Ning said as she looked up.

Li Bo Yue was slightly taken aback when he heard that, then he started smiling. "I know."

The car was parked outside the airport as the two of them flew to Hengdian2.

"Right, who was in this role previously?" Ning Ning asked on the plane, "What happened to her?"

"Yang Yue." Li Bo Yue was looking at his phone. "Nothing happened to her."

Ning Ning turned and looked at him in surprise. "Then why did the position open up?"

Li Bo Yue turned and smiled at her. "Director Chen snatched the role for you."

< <The Great Empire> > Crew.

There was a feeling of uncertainty within the crew today.

Everyone would occasionally glance at the door, seemingly waiting for a person.

That person had arrived.

Ning Ning and Li Bo Yue entered the palace in front of them. Just as her left leg crossed the threshold, everyone turned their sights on her, it was like arrows lodged onto her body.

She almost could not take the second step to enter, but Li Bo Yue gave her a light pat on the back and pushed her in.

"You're here." The Director walked over with a smile as he introduced her to everyone, "Everyone get acquainted, this is Ning Ning. She will substitute in for the role of Princess Qing Luan and will be filming < <The Great Empire> > with us for the next four months.

A round of applause rang out, though it was not clear how many of them were sincere.

...Ning Ning used to be the one getting replaced, this was her first time replacing someone else. Besides being awkward, it was just more awkwardness, but she could not back out and take the plane to fly back. Right now she could only smile at the onlookers.

"Sigh, life has been tough recently." The Director pulled Ning Ning to the side before lowering his voice and said, "We cut out all the parts

Yang Yue had acted in previously. It's a good thing she didn't have a big part, but we would have to reshoot all of her scenes, so it would still require a bit of time. You have to be prepared to work overtime."

Ning Ning nodded frantically, "I can start working overtime today."

"Relax, relax." The Director waved his hand unexpectedly. "There's no rush, we're still missing a person."

Ning Ning was taken aback. *What? We are?*

Just as she was pondering over what he meant, she suddenly realised the onlookers' gaze fell upon the entrance again, including that of the Director's beside her.

The sound of footsteps were getting closer as the person stepped over the threshold.

Ning Ning slowly turned around and had a mild shock as she looked at the familiar face.

"Oh! You're finally here." The Director immediately stepped up and welcomed the person. "I've been waiting for so long. Here, let me introduce you to everyone. Actually, scratch that. Everyone knows who you are. Chen Shuang He, replacing Li Tao Ran as General Ju Que. He will be filming <<The Great Empire>> with us here for the following four months."

Li Tao Ran... wasn't that the original male lead for <<The Great Empire>>??

The corners of Ning Ning's mouth twitched as she looked at the refined and cultured smile on Chen Shuang He's face.

Maybe <<The Great Empire>> should rename itself to <<The Great Replacements>>...

1This is an online marketplace in China. <https://world.taobao.com/>

2This is a place with a film studio in China.

Chapter 57

57: Lowered Difficulty?

"Three minutes..." Chen Shuang He muttered while looking down.

"What are you talking about Chen Ge?" The Rookie beside him looked at him curiously.

"No, it's nothing." Chen Shuang He looked up, his smile was like a spring breeze.

He had to have been seeing things, Chen Ge was publicly acknowledged as the gentleman of the entertainment industry, how could he have had a scary expression? The Rookie complained to him, "Chen Ge, I'm about to be in trouble."

The two of them were a little acquainted, Chen Shuang He asked gently, "What's wrong?"

"It's that Ning Ning, the queen of crap films." The Rookie complained softly, "Let's take the scene we're about to film as an example, Yang Yue had twenty-odd NGs while we filmed with her, I almost fell asleep while kneeling on the floor. Wouldn't I be sleeping on the floor the whole day if we swapped Ning Ning in?"

It appeared again! That demonic expression!

"How can it be?" The demonic expression on Chen Shuang He's face disappeared in a flash, his smile was still so gentle. "She is not as bad as you described her to be."

The Rookie had long forgotten about Ning Ning, he stared at Chen Shuang He stupidly. Was he seeing things again? Or should he visit an ophthalmologist?

"Alright, it's almost time. Let's go over." Chen Shuang He gave his shoulder a pat. He conveniently got closer and whispered in his ear, "Oh right, she is a very good actress."

"...Huh?" The Rookie was taken aback.

"Not even I would dare to underestimate her." Chen Shuang He smiled gently at him. "You're but an actor who makes a living because of your looks, who are you to underestimate her?"

The Rookie looked dumbfoundedly at Chen Shuang He's back as he

left. Someone gave his shoulder a pat and asked, "What did Chen Ge talk to you about? Did he give you pointers for your scene?"

Rookie, "He said, Ning Ning is a very good actress, not even he would dare to underestimate her, I am but an actor that makes a living because of my looks, so I shouldn't even think about underestimating her."

The other party, "...How are you hard of hearing at such a young age!"

No one would believe that Chen Shuang He had said such a thing. Similarly, no one would have believed that Ning Ning had any acting skills.

There were even people making side bets on how many times Ning Ning would get NG in the next scene.

"Yang Yue already had twenty-odd NGs. If it were Ning Ning, two hundred?"

This was a joke, but this was also what everyone genuinely thought.

<<The Great Empire>> was a scramble for imperial supremacy, a fight between a pair of brothers. When did it start? Where did it start?

It started from the announcement of the arrival of a princess. It started from a regal beauty walking in from the backdoor. The foreign ministers, the imperial bodyguards, the palace maids and the eunuchs were all bowing down without fail.

Among those were the male lead who was a general, and the second male lead who was a notable minister.

It would have been fine if neither of them raised their heads, even if they did, it would have been fine if the Princess did not smile at them when they did.

It was only when they looked back in their old age that they realised, everything had started from that smile.

This smile was also the opening scene for <<The Great Empire>>. In this superficial era we lived in, a lot of people watched a show for its opening scene, read books for its opening (chapter). If the opening was not done well, they would give up on the book. No one cared about what happened later on. So, no matter how well your show was in the latter parts, the opening must be fascinating enough to attract people.

This also caused Yang Yue to receive a lot of criticism when she was doing the scene. "That smile is too fake", "That smile is too suggestive", "That smile is too dumb"... She had to endure criticisms for an entire day, so much so that she only barely passed after her face had stiffened from smiling too much.

What about Ning Ning? What kind of smile would she show what kind of laughing stock she would be? Everyone waited with bated breaths—especially the Rookie who was acting as the second male lead. He was the one who couldn't wait the most!

"!"

On the royal court, in the midst of silence.

The silence was not because there was no one in the court, on the contrary, it was filled with civil and military officials, but none of them were speaking to one another, they only exchanged looks.

"Wah—"

The six-year-old Emperor on the throne started to cry, as if he finally could not bear the overwhelming atmosphere in the court. He cried as he climbed off the throne and waddled towards the front door while sobbing repeatedly, "I want Auntie, I want Auntie!"

The court ladies and eunuchs frantically chased after him, like a flock of chicks chasing after a mother hen. The usually serious Royal Court had turned into a market because of his tantrum.

The old ministers shook their heads and sighed, the new ministers whispered among themselves, there were also a few of them whose eyes were burning with ambition. Who knew what kind of ideas were brewing in their mind? Countless pairs of eyes filled with varied implications took turns to appear in front of the camera.

The shot first fixed itself on the eyes of the second male lead, the Rookie was doing quite well today, frowning with worry.

But harms would not exist without comparisons.

Once the camera shifted onto the eyes of Chen Shuang He, one would realise that the Rookie's performance was limited to his eyebrows, the expression in his eyes were dead.

Chen Shuang He quietly gazed at the Little Emperor from the crowd, his eyes were filled with concern, but this type of concern was superficial. When the Little Emperor cried for 'auntie', the concern started to change into disdain, then slowly changed into something even more dangerous.

"Do you see that? That is acting with your eyes." Someone quietly discussed, "I can tell that the Emperor is definitely useless just by watching his eyes. So useless that the ministers are starting to stir."

"Shut up!" The Director shouted cut, then he roared at the direction where the person was speaking, "Get out if you want to talk! Do not make a fuss here!"

Chen Shuang He did not even flinch at the prospect of reshooting the scene, but the Rookie was extremely agitated in his mind, he was even trembling a little. <<The Great Empire>> was actually a show with dual male leads, but the filming had just started and Chen Shuang He had already stolen everyone's attention...

"Her Royal Highness Princess Qing Luan!"

He quickly gathered up his negative feelings upon hearing the shrill scream of the eunuch, bowed down and welcomed the princess alongside the ministers and generals, "Your Royal Highness."

A fragrance filled up the court.

Two maids dressed in white were holding incense burners as they crossed the threshold. They had no makeup on their faces, the smoke from the incense burners were spiraling upwards, causing them to look like two heavenly maidens in a Buddhist painting.

They purified the air with the incense burners as they walked past everyone.

Afterwards, a regal lady dressed in white slowly crossed the threshold.

"Auntie!" The eyes of the Little Emperor who had a faceful of tears lit up. He struggled free from the grasp of a eunuch and rushed up to hug her leg, then started crying again.

"Hush, now." The lady in white lectured him in a languid manner. Her voice was placid, but it had the trace of a threat.

The Little Emperor hiccuped twice before wiping his tears grudgingly. It was then that she was willing to hold his hand and walked to the throne together with him.

They walked past the minister who had been there for three imperial reigns, the veteran generals, but somehow, they stopped in front of a non-authoritative minister.

"Raise your head."

The Rookie heard her bland command.

He was stunned for a moment, then slowly looked up at the familiar yet strange face.

Was this Ning Ning, or someone else? This person was looking down at him condescendingly—yes, condescendingly, he could only think of such a term. He was definitely taller than her, but the way she looked at him made him feel he was an inch shorter.

What was the inch she had on him? Bloodline? Position? Power?

She slowly started to smile at him after gazing at him for a while.

It seemed like she paid special attention to him, it also seemed like she was interested in the power he represented in a spur of the moment, it also seemed like she was interested in him as a person at the same time.

The smile was fleeting. She returned to her serious conduct as she turned and walked towards the throne, leaving behind the Rookie who was dumbstruck, along with a group of ministers who were quickly exchanging glances. What was she smiling about? What was she hinting at? What was she planning to do? That smile was full of secrecy, everyone had different interpretations of it.

The Rookie suddenly came back to his senses after being in a daze for a while. He shouted, "That's not right!"

The people around him got a shock, the Rookie then walked quickly towards the Director. He conveniently took the script from his assistant and pointed at it while telling the Director, "This is not how the scene is supposed to go. She does not have this line at all!"

Ning Ning was slightly taken aback as she heard that.

"Which line?" She came over to take a look, her brows furrowed. She compared it with her version of the script and was surprised to find out that—the two of them had different scripts. The line 'raise your head' was not in his script.

What was going on? She borrowed a script from another person to check, that script did not have the line as well. The line was only in her script.

Ning Ning had an ugly expression on her face. The others had a strange look on them. On the surface, it looked like Ning Ning took the wrong script, but it was more likely that someone had given her the wrong script on purpose.

"It's better to add this line."

A man's voice broke the silence.

Ning Ning along with the others looked towards the voice. They saw Chen Shuang He flipped through his script while saying, "My character is an ambitious person who plans things deliberately, the second male lead is a smart and fiercely loyal person. Neither of our characters are frivolous and audacious enough to peek at the princess. For both of us to raise our heads to look at her..."

He looked up and told the onlookers, "It has to be because she said, 'Raise your head'."

Just as the Rookie was about to dispute the point, the Director answered with a laugh, "That is exactly the case."

He looked at the onlookers, especially the Rookie who was tongue tied as he explained, "The script Ning Ning is holding is the unedited version of the script. That is to say, it is the true <<The Great Empire>>!"

The Rookie was surprised. "Then what about the version we are using now?"

"...The version that had the difficulty lowered." The Director thought while putting a cigarette in his mouth, "The difficulty was lowered for Yang Yue."

The crew did not know that Yang Yue was the second female lead appointed by the sponsors.

She had received the script long before anyone else and had auditioned in front of the Director.

She had twenty NGs with just the smile and fifty NGs with the line.

In the end, Yang Yue cried as she was going crazy. "This line isn't even that important, can't you just remove it?"

They could only edit the script as she was the actress appointed by the sponsors.

He did not expect her to be replaced and to end up with an actress who was publicly acknowledged to be worse. He thought he had already made the necessary changes to the script, making the necessary preparations by lowering the difficulty, but by the looks of it now, it was not necessary.

"Which version of the script do you guys like better?" The Director asked with a smile, "Lower or higher difficulty?"

Chen Shuang He, "Higher difficulty."

Ning Ning, "Higher difficulty."

The Rookie hated himself for being slow to respond, how could he say lower difficulty now. "...Higher difficulty."

The Female Lead who was late just followed along with the crowd even though she did not know what was happening, "Higher difficulty."

A super high difficulty and hellish <<The Great Empire>> had begun.

1This literally translates to 'elder brother' which is a polite way to address an older male.

Chapter 58

58: Increased Difficulty

"Ah!" The Rookie almost had to crawl out of the set, his face was as pale as a salted fish. "It feels as if...as if my soul has left my body..."

"Quick...quickly give me a sip, I can't take it anymore..." The Female Lead who had also turned into a salted fish crawled out of the set, her assistant frantically brought a bottle of red bull to her mouth. She put the straw in her mouth and took a huge swig.

The Director roared from within the set, "Next scene! Where did everyone go?"

"Coming!" The two of them ran back in with tears in their eyes, they had the same thoughts in their mind.

Hell.

I'm not doing this again.

I'm not doing this even if I get paid.

I will never work with this director and those two ever again.

Only the two of them were getting NGs, the other two never had a single one. The only times when the other two were given NG was when the Director was looking for a better angle for the shot.

"She could have just relied on her looks, why is she trying so hard to act?" The Female Lead bit down on the straw, gnashing her teeth in anger at Ning Ning who was not far from her, it was as if she had forgotten that she had once mocked Ning Ning for being a vase.

"It's just a web drama, we're not aiming for the Oscars, why are you trying so hard? You even dragged everyone else down with you." The Rookie looked at Chen Shuang He tearfully, he bumped the shoulders of the female lead. "Let me have a sip of that red bull."

Although it seemed like three years had passed to most of the crew.

In reality, it had only been three months...

If one would describe the performance of Chen Shuang He as meeting expectations, then Ning Ning's performance was absolutely blowing everyone's expectations out of the water. The increased

difficulty of the script did not faze her at all. The overbearing Chen Shuang He did not make life difficult for her. As the others turned into salted fish one by one, she was still swimming with ease.

It was Ning Ning's last scene for the day.

It was also a scene involving both her and Chen Shuang He.

It was about—the final night!

The Little Emperor could not control this large empire, thus his beautiful aunt put her charm to good use, seizing the support of an unparalleled valiant general and a civil official with unrivalled resourceness.

She named them the "Twin Walls of the Empire". She had originally hoped that they would work together to help her and the Little Emperor, she did not expect one of them to betray her.

General Ju Que, he actually intended to control the country using the Emperor...

Princess Qing Luan had to choose between him and the Empire, between him and the Little Emperor who had started to act on his own initiatives!

"!"

A red candle was burning bright, illuminating the canopy within the princess' chamber.

A person slowly sat up under the canopy, Ning Ning who was only wearing underwear looked coldly at the man who was lying on the bed.

She retrieved the dagger she had prepared beforehand from underneath the bed, silently pulling the dagger out of its sheath.

There were no lines, she could only act with her eyes.

If it were the version with the difficulty lowered, she would only have had to shed a tear uncontrollably, waking Chen Shuang He up in the process. But now, she had to use her eyes to transform Princess Qing Luan into another person—a female statesperson who once made up her mind to kill a person, who could not let herself show any weakness.

She raised her dagger, then plunged it at his neck.

—But he stopped her by grabbing her wrist.

Chen Shuang He suddenly opened his eyes. His eyes were as bright

as snow, turned out he was not sleeping at all. He flashed a cold smile. "You decided to lay your hands on me in the end."

He spoke with such affirmation, it was as if he had seen through her, as if he had never believed her in the first place.

He turned his body over and was on top of her, holding the dagger to her neck with one hand, caressing her cheek with the other. "A day as husband and wife means an endless devotion for the rest of your life, yet this is how you treat me?"

His face turned ferocious. "Is power that important to you? You want to kill me to acquire power as well?"

Ning Ning laid on the bed, the dangling ornament in her hair clinked crisply on the jade pillow, traces of his love bites were still visible on her snow-white clavicle. She suddenly started to giggle, then said to him, "I should be asking you that instead."

She looked at him blandly, "Do you want me? Or do you want the position?"

Chen Shuang He was slightly startled.

"I can marry you, I can accompany you." She gazed at him, her voice was calm even with the ice-cold dagger at her neck. "I will accompany you in whatever you want to do, wherever you want to go. No matter if you want to walk through the misty rain in the south or trek the plateaus in the north."

She smiled gently, as if it was their first time meeting, so hard to grasp, so mesmerising. She asked gently, "Wouldn't you like to?"

Chen Shuang He stared at her without moving.

There were no lines, he was only acting with his eyes.

"...What if both of us want it?" In the end, he asked in a low voice, "What if both of us want the throne?"

He tossed the dagger in his hand aside after finishing what he had to say. He ferociously and recklessly kissed her with a trace of annoyance and helplessness. The canopy started to shake as his movements were too violent. Someone shouted as the bed shook, Ning Ning was tossed off the bed and she rolled on the floor until she hit the leg of a table.

Chen Shuang He pulled the curtains back and stepped down from the bed. He held his neck with his left hand, blood trickling down from the gap between his fingers.

Ning Ning slowly sat up on the floor, holding the gold hair ornament in her right hand, the sharp end was stained with fresh blood.

Chen Shuang He lowered his left hand and looked at the blood on it, he slowly turned his head and looked at her with a complicated expression. "This is how you treat me even though I like you so much?"

Ning Ning was unfazed, she even elegantly fixed her hair.

"...Without my protection, the people on the royal court would have devoured you long ago!" Chen Shuang He's eyes turned slightly red. "The Prime Minister offered both his daughters to me just to draw me to his side, all I had to do was to agree to make one of them the Empress! But I refused to agree, because there is only one Empress in my heart. Only you!"

"I am a bonafide princess, which kingdom would not make me empress if I marry into them?" Ning Ning looked at him incredulously instead, the corners of her mouth curled up as she mocked him, "Not to mention that you've been colluding with the people of the royal court. You have the cheek to say that you have been protecting me? How shameless."

She was unwilling to lose her composure even in the face of her archenemy, even her mocking smile was charming. Chen Shuang He's chest puffed twice in quick succession. He looked at her with eyes filled with love, yet there was hatred in them as well. He wanted to pull out his sword and kill her three times over, yet he also wanted to put his sword down.

"...I want both you and the throne." In the end, he said viciously, "But I will not make you empress anymore. You will be a concubine, a maidservant by my side! That will be your punishment!"

"Oh." Ning Ning said blandly. She looked down, thinking.

Chen Shuang He looked out for any changes in her expression nervously, he feigned calmness and said, "...I might change my mind if you beg me."

"...How do you want me to beg?" Ning Ning looked up at him with a smile. She slowly came up in front of him, reached out and grabbed his hand, then placed a dagger in his hand and guided his hand to stab herself in the abdomen.

Everything happened too quickly, or maybe their acting was too immersive.

The Rookie got too engrossed while watching it. He only came back to his senses when someone gave him a pat on his shoulder, it was his cue.

The door opened with a loud crash, the Rookie rushed in while leading a group of guards. He called out, "Princess!"

He rushed up and carried Princess Qing Luan off the floor.

...What now?

The Rookie opened his mouth, but his mind was blank. *It's over.* He forgot his lines.

The Director furrowed his brows upon seeing this. Just as he was about to shout 'cut' he suddenly heard a soft voice, "Why are you only here now?"

The one who spoke was not the Rookie, it was Ning Ning.

She laid in the embrace of the Rookie. Looking up at him weakly, the tears in her eyes started to roll down her cheek. She asked him grudgingly, "Why did you let him hurt me?"

"...Why am I only here now?" He looked at those pairs of eyes, the words were uncontrollably spilling out of his mouth which had originally forgotten his lines. He felt difficulties in breathing, causing him to speak with great difficulty, "How could I let him hurt you?"

Ning Ning abruptly smiled at him.

The smile looked like the one she had when they first met. What she was smiling about on that day, whom she was smiling at, there had been no answer. No matter if it was Chen Shuang He or the Rookie, those who stubbornly believed she was smiling at them had been asking her for the answer, but she would never say.

It was only now that he knew the answer.

"Good thing you're here..." That was all she could say to him before she slowly closed her eyes.

All the Rookie could feel was an emptiness, tears were frantically rolling down his face.

"Cut!"

This take had passed, everyone but one person breathed a sigh of relief.

The Rookie, "Boohoo...."

Ning Ning who was getting drenched in his tears, "..."

Director, what do I do, he is really crying!

Such incidents happen in the crew from time to time. An actor would get especially invested in the scene, causing them to have difficulties getting out of character. Good thing the Rookie's situation wasn't too serious, he recovered after everyone consoled him, just so happened that it was time for lunch.

"I think she had really fallen in love with me, I know it by looking into her eyes..." The Rookie said in a serious manner. He saw Chen Shuang He revealed a demonic expression when he turned his head...

He was not seeing things! This person had problems!

"What's that nonsense?" Chen Shuang He didn't bother to put on a facade this time, he smiled coldly. "She doesn't like you, it was just acting."

True, it was just acting.

So far in the process of filming of <<The Great Empire>>, he had not been able to break her in three minutes, but that didn't mean he did not gain anything.

He discovered a secret—

There was no natural progression in Ning Ning's acting skills!

No matter who it was, even if the person was a genius, their improvement would happen in a step-by-step manner, unlike Ning Ning. She didn't even go through a rebirth phase, she immediately changed into another person!

Indeed...she simply became another person.

The Ning Ning on the audition for <<Ugly Girl>>, the Ning Ning on the re-audition for <<Phantom of the Theater>>, and the Ning Ning filming <<The Great Empire>> with him were three separate people. The first one acted relying on emotions, the second one had already developed her acting skills, the third one...could actually spur on other actors, but that didn't require talent, it required experience.

How many days had passed? Where did she get her experience from?

Chen Shuang He pulled his assistant back as the latter walked past him, he asked, "Where's Ning Ning?"

"She left." His assistant answered, "She had finished her scenes. She said her goodbye to the Director and left on a plane today."

Chen Shuang Her was taken aback. "She left that hurriedly, did she say why?"

His assistant shook his head, "No."

Chen Shuang He furrowed his brows after letting his assistant go. He thought while looking at the darkening skies outside, "Ning Ning, what kind of secrets are you hiding?"

On a plane in the sky.

"Lady, please switch off your phone." An air stewardess walked past.

"Alright." Ning Ning looked at the screen on her phone for the last time before she switched it off.

It was a message Wen Yu sent her on Wechat.

[I have discovered something]

A photo was attached to it.

In the photo was a ticket to Life Theater.

Chapter 59

59: Danger

"Where did you get that ticket?"

Once she alighted from the plane, Ning Ning called Wen Yu as she walked out of the airport.

"You Ling." He answered with a name that gave Ning Ning a mild surprise. "I asked her about meeting any strange person while filming < <The Person Within the Painting> >."

Wen Yu continued after a pause, "Your mother—Ning Yu Ren—asked for a ticket from her repeatedly after the filming for < <The Person Within the Painting> > ended, a ticket for Life Theater."

Ning Ning stopped in her tracks.

"She pestered her for a year and a change in total." Wen Yu said, "In the end, You Ling could not take it anymore, she found someone to make a fake ticket according to what Ning Yu Ren had described."

"It was seen through?" Ning Ning asked even though she already knew the answer.

"Correct, it was seen through. They had a huge argument because of this, according to You Ling..." Wen Yu carefully considered his next words, before euphemistically saying, "Your mother's situation did not look good. As she was dragged away by security, she screamed at You Ling repeatedly, saying something like 'You caused me to go in without a ticket'..."

Sneaking in...

Ning Ning clearly remembered an important point in the message mama had left behind—*Never ever sneak in*.

So Mama sneaked in before.

What impact did sneaking in have on her? Wen Yu spoke too euphemistically. What he meant by 'her situation not looking good' probably was about Ning Yu Ren looking like she was going crazy, otherwise, security would not have been called on her.

"This ticket is the fake ticket from that time, your mother threw it back at You Ling." Wen Yu said, "She dug it out for me when I visited

her, I took a photo for you to have a look. How is it? Do you know anything about this?"

"No." Ning Ning said against her conscience.

"Is that right?" Wen Yu said blandly, sounding like he did not believe her. "Inform me if you remember anything."

"Alright." Ning Ning rushed over to Life Theater on a taxi immediately after hanging up.

She only had one thought in her mind at this time—she had to enter Life Theater before Wen Yu did. Before Wen Yu found more clues, she had to find a way to rescue people...to rescue Shi Zhong Tang.

"Maybe I can tell him everything?" Another thought popped out, but she suppressed it forcefully. She closed her eyes, saying, "Then he will definitely enter the theater."

The taxi stopped at 35 Rouge Street. She alighted after paying the driver, the cold wind made her wrap her coat around herself tightly.

Clop, clop, clop. She walked slowly to the entrance of Life Theater on her high heels.

Life Theater looked the same on that day. The lanterns, the Doorman who sat on the stone steps of the entrance as well as the old poster on the wall combined to look like a never changing oil painting.

Ning Ning turned her head and looked at the poster on the wall. New night, new poster.

Title: < <Person by the Pillow> >

Starring: Yan Qing

A bridal chamber was on the poster, the word *happiness*¹ was put up on the wall as well as on the pillow.

The bed was bare. There was no one in the poster, but if one were to look closely, there were a couple of shadows, they seemed to belong to a man and a woman.

Ning Ning turned back and took out her last ticket from her handbag, she presented it to Boss Qu.

Boss Qu slowly raised his head. He stared at her viciously then spoke word by word, "Go. Back. Home!"

"I have a ticket." Ning Ning knew that he could not turn her away.

"I want to go in and watch a movie."

Boss Qu looked like he wanted to turn her down, but he could not do it. The theater bestowed powers upon him, it also restricted his actions. He could not reject a customer with a ticket in hand.

"...Pick another movie." His attitude softened after a moment, he sounded as if he was trying to coax a child, "Come back tomorrow or the day after tomorrow."

Ning Ning blinked, "Why?"

Boss Qu opened his mouth but hesitated, he turned his face and looked at the poster beside him. He said in a low voice, "This movie is too dangerous for you."

Dangerous?

Ning Ning looked at the poster with surprise. This was not the first time she transmigrated into a movie. She burned to death in the first movie, died fighting a criminal in the second movie, and although she did not die in the third movie, she went through a lot of scares. However, Boss Qu had never used 'dangerous' to describe those three movies.

< <Person by the Pillow> > .

Based on the name and the content of the poster, this was most likely a romance film or a family drama. Why would Boss Qu describe it as dangerous?

"Is there anything special about it?" Ning Ning asked.

Boss Qu shook his head, indicating that it was something he could not answer.

"... Is it related to you?" Ning Ning suddenly asked after being silent for a while.

Boss Qu was taken aback for a moment.

"Will I be able to find any clues from the movie?" Ning Ning looked into his eyes. "Clues about the theater, clues on how to rescue the two of you?"

After locking eyes for a moment, Ning Ning slowly said, "I understand...Let me in."

Boss Qu stood up on the floor and used his huge body to block off the entrance of the theater. It seemed like he wanted to turn himself into a second door, not allowing her to enter.

Ning Ning handed the ticket to him without saying a word.

Boss Qu said while gnashing his teeth, "It has nothing to do with me, it..."

He tried to reveal more, but he could not. He clearly did not want to take the ticket, but his right hand reached over while trembling.

"One person per ticket, invalid upon admission." He tore the ticket in his hand in an extremely slow manner. His body which did not even shudder when it was stabbed was quaking at this moment. Ning Ning could hear him scolding her under his breath, "Foolish, foolish thing, foolish daughter..." Suddenly, he turned his head and shouted loudly, "Shi Zhong Tang! Come here for a moment!"

"Sorry." Ning Ning told him softly as she walked past him. She did not want to make things so difficult for him, but his reaction, the look in his eyes, and the things he said made her feel that this movie was extremely important. She did not know when she would ever have a chance to see such a 'dangerous' movie again if she missed it tonight.

Boss Qu did not say anything. He waited for her to enter the theater before saying in a low voice from behind her, "I should have ignored you, from the beginning I should have..."

Ning Ning froze for a moment before walking in without hesitation.

The swordsman in white with a jade mask was already waiting for her inside the door. He reached his hand out and placed a finger on her lips, shushing her the moment she walked in.

"Don't say a word, follow me." Shi Zhong Tang said softly.

He pulled Ning Ning along with their bodies lowered, quietly walking into the seats.

Ning Ning had a regular ticket. Her seat was very far back, far far away from the screen.

Shi Zhong Tang escorted her to her seat, then stood beside her and pointed to the front.

Ning Ning looked to where he was pointing at, she was mildly surprised.

Life Theater didn't have sofa seats, they had wooden chairs with carved patterns instead, the back of the chairs were hollow, there was a plethora of patterns carved on it. She looked ahead and saw a person.

—Another customer.

Ning Ning was so surprised that she almost jumped out of her seat, but Shi Zhong Tang placed his hand on her shoulder and pressed her down the moment she jumped so that she would not draw attention to herself.

Ning Ning collected herself and started to observe the other party. The person was sitting very close to the front, the Court Lady Mask who had always served her previously was serving the person eagerly. Ning Ning could not tell whether the other party was a man or a woman due to the far distance, the low lighting and the fact that the other party had their back to her. She could not even tell the person's age.

Her shoulder suddenly felt a squeeze, Ning Ning looked up and looked at Shi Zhong Tang. She saw that he tilted his head and glanced at her, then he pointed to the leftmost chair in the front, one, two, three...he counted the chairs one by one.

It took a few seconds before Ning Ning understood what he meant.

She quickly followed his example and counted the seats from the left up to the customer, she arrived at the answer in her heart, "Twenty three—odd-numbered designated ticket!"

Odd-numbered designated ticket, one of the special tickets of Life Theater.

It allowed one to designate the person to transmigrate as. This person had to be someone besides the main character, the person had to have appeared in the movie.

Ning Ning looked at the other from a distance, there was relief and hesitation on her face.

She could not be the only customer in such a big movie theater, she had long guessed that this would happen one day, meeting another customer in the theater.

What then?

Since they were watching the same movie, then they most likely would transmigrate into the same movie. Ning Ning originally thought that it would help if there was another person transmigrating with her, but upon looking at the attitude of Boss Qu and Shi Zhong Tang...It seemed like they didn't approve of her being friendly with the other customer.

Why is that?

The lights dimmed without waiting for her to think, the entire

cinema fell into darkness.

The screen slowly lit up, it looked like someone who just opened his eyes, only the eye whites could be seen.

A sentence slowly appeared after a long while.

"This film has been adapted from a true story."

Next, the voice of a woman rang out, it sounded like she was trained in singing, her voice was very elegant and full of feelings.

"Looking at you, person by the pillow." She sang sweetly, it sounded like she was singing a lullaby to the person by the pillow.

"Looking at you, person by the pillow." It was the same lyrics, but her voice was full of terror for some reason.

"Looking at you, person by the pillow!" A lament full of despair in a high-pitched voice sounded.

The voice poured forth like a tsunami, drowning the two people in the audience...

1994, University-Affiliated High School.

"Hey, why are you still sleeping?"

"Wake up, quickly wake up, the car is almost here."

"Yun Lin!"

Ning Ning opened her eyes.

There was a white mosquito net, an electric fan was spinning on the ceiling. "One two one, one two one..." Could be heard from outside the window, it sounded like students attending physical education class.

She turned over and saw that a short-haired twenty-plus-year-old girl was standing by her bed. There was a bunk bed behind her, both the top and bottom levels were covered by white mosquito nets, the bed at the bottom had quite a number of textbooks on top of it. Upon closer inspection, they were for second grade of junior high school.

"Quickly get changed!" The girl dressed in black pulled Ning Ning out of bed rashly.

"I'm up, I'm up..." Ning Ning pretended to have just woken up, she rubbed her eyes as she got off the bed.

First question, who am I? A boarding student or a boarding staff member?

Ning Ning opened her wardrobe, it was full of clothes for adults. They had bland colours, were conservative and old-fashioned like they were for a nun from the middle ages.

She randomly picked out something white and wore it, then exclaimed, "Where did my purse go?"

She began to look for it on the bed, the table and the drawers. In the end, she found something she was looking for at the bottom drawer.

A teaching qualification certificate.

She opened it up and saw a photo of a long-haired girl. She looked as plain, as conservative and as old-fashioned like a nun from the middle ages as her clothes. From the certificate, Ning Ning determined that she was a language teacher.

"What are you doing?" The girl in black stomped her foot. "I'll go ahead if you still won't go."

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Ning Ning put the certificate back and closed the drawer before she walked towards the other girl.

The girl in black talked a lot along the way, while Ning Ning remained silent. There was not enough information, she did not know how she should portray herself. As of now, the more she said the more mistakes she would make, so it was better to remain silent.

Then, she would ideally live as Yun Lin for a while, interact more with her social circle, then she could begin to understand what she should be doing.

"Good morning, Teacher Yun Lin. Good morning, Teacher Li Ping Ping." A few students greeted them along the way. Ning Ning had finally determined the identity of the girl in black beside her thanks to the students.

They walked out of the entrance of the school to the nearby bus stop. A bus was getting ready to drive off, Li Ping Ping shouted at it to stop, then the two of them boarded the bus.

Passengers boarded and alighted the bus as it drove along, yet Ning Ning and Li Ping Ping remained seated on the bus. It was not until the last stop that she saw Li Ping Ping stood up.

Final stop: Fushan Funeral Parlour.

The two of them alighted the bus. Li Ping Ping walked to a nearby gift shop and pointed at a daisy and asked, "How much for this?"

Shopkeeper, "Three dollars."

Li Ping Ping, "That's too expensive!"

Shopkeeper, "This is the price around here, you can go ask around."

Li Ping Ping murmured softly before turning around and smiling at Ning Ning. "Pay me half of it, this flower would be a gift from the both of us, how's that?"

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment.

"Then it's decided." Li Ping Ping said. She walked up and searched Ning Ning for her purse, then took out \$2 before smiling while returning the purse. "I see that you don't have coins. You'll pay 2 dollars while I pay 1 dollar."

Ning Ning looked at her while tilting her head as she turned around and paid for the flower. Based on this incident, she had pretty much figured out Li Ping Ping's personality, the personality of the owner of her body, along with the relationship the two of them had.

One of them was forceful, the other did not fight back. One of them was overbearing, the other bore with it silently. With this line of thinking, Li Ping Ping might not have asked her along for accompaniment, but for her to pay for things.

The daisies had been wrapped up, Li Ping Ping held it as she smiled at Ning Ning. "Let's go to Yan Qing's funeral."

Ning Ning was shocked upon hearing that.

Yan Qing?

...The main character for < <Person by the Pillow> >?

1This Chinese character is created by putting two happiness side by side. Typically the character "囍" is written in Chinese calligraphy, and frequently appears on traditional decorative items, associated with marriage. Double happiness symbol also often found all over the wedding ceremony, as well as on gift items given to the bride and groom. The color of the character is usually red, occasionally black.

Chapter 60

60: The Man at the Funeral

They had arrived early, the funeral had yet to start.

Ning Ning knew why Li Ping Ping came this early.

"My condolences, Mr Pei." Li Ping Ping told the man beside her attentively and considerately while holding the flowers.

The man was the husband of the deceased.

He was wearing an expensive black suit, he revealed a branded watch when he looked down as he was checking the time. The way he dressed was enough to make any Tom, Dick or Harry look handsome, moreover, he was naturally handsome.

But Ning Ning did not dare to get close to him.

"This is?" He turned his head and looked at her.

Li Ping Ping seemed like she did not want to introduce Ning Ning, but she did not want to leave a rude impression on him, so she could only reluctantly say, "This is mine and Yan Qing's colleague, Yun Lin."

"Nice to meet you." The man reached his hand out to Ning Ning. "Thank you for coming to Yan Qing's funeral, I am her husband, Pei Xuan."

This was why Ning Ning did not dare get close to him.

Pei Xuan.

He had the same name as the former doorman of Life Theater who defected.

Were they the same person? Ning Ning looked at his face. She felt like it looked like him, but it also didn't look like him at the same time. She was busy escaping with Shi Zhong Tang at that time, she did not notice what he looked like.

—She really thought that his lips looked identical, they were both frivolous.

"Hey." Li Ping Ping's voice of displeasure rang out beside Ning Ning's ear.

This was when she came back to her senses, she had already shaken hands with Pei Xuan for quite some time.

She frantically pulled her hand back and looked down shyly, doing it all according to her character.

"Yun Lin, is it?" He looked at her with what seemed like a smile, his attitude towards her seemed to be different from his attitude towards Li Ping Ping. This made Li Ping Ping who had been met with cold rebuke despite her efforts very angry.

Li Ping Ping waited for Pei Xuan to leave with a funeral parlour staff before she told Ning Ning coldly, "We are friends right?"

Ning Ning could guess what she wanted to say next, but she still conformed and asked, "Yes, what is it?"

"Then you should stay away from him." Li Ping Ping snorted coldly, then looked at the back of Pei Xuan with fiery eyes. She said in a determined tone, "He is mine."

Of course Ning Ning would not fight with her, she only felt that she had a better understanding of Li Ping Ping—after all, not many people would lay their hands on the husband of their deceased friend or colleague immediately after they had passed away.

Afterwards, the guests slowly arrived. The funeral started, stalks of flowers were laid on the coffin, two people with white hair cried their eyes out. Ning Ning overheard the discussion of the people beside her, "Those are Yan Qing's parents, right? Poor things, they gave birth to such an unfilial daughter."

Hmm?

Shouldn't they be crying because they were sending their daughter off? Why did it turn into them being sad about their daughter being unfilial?

It was a good thing that there was someone else with the same doubts. The person asked, "What happened? Tell me."

"You didn't know? Yan Qing was discovered to have committed adultery and was reported to the school, that was what made her commit suicide out of guilt. Sigh, I pity her husband. He's so young and handsome, so successful in his career. Out of all the women to marry, he had to marry a cheater..."

Rumours, gossip, hypocrisy, insincerity, all these filled the room like haze, making it hard to breathe.

"Please end quickly." Ning Ning said in her mind.

After the funeral ended, she began playing her role in this life.

"An odd-numbered designated ticket allows a customer to transmigrate as anyone besides the main character." Ning Ning thought while she tidied her stuff back at the dormitory, "He or she might be beside me and even know me..."

"What are you doing?" Li Ping Ping asked as she walked in the door.

"Spring cleaning." Ning Ning turned her head and looked at Li Ping Ping, thinking, "Take her for example, she could be the other customer."

"Then help clean my side as well, I'm going out for a meal." Li Ping Ping waved and left.

After Ning Ning watched her leave, she slowly turned around and looked at the room.

A person's room reflected their personality, especially for someone working as a teacher, especially for Yun Lin who had a conventional personality and not much nightlife. The room was her only home after she got off work, it was the place where she spent most of her day.

So if Ning Ning wanted to know what kind of a person Yun Lin was, she could start from her room.

"Let's begin." Ning Ning said to herself, "If I do not want to be found out by the other customer, I have to completely transform into Yun Lin."

A movie named < <Yun Lin> > had begun filming. As the main character for this movie, Ning Ning would have to portray a junior high school teacher named Yun Lin.

Yun Lin was a teacher who struck fear in the students. Ning Ning realised that if she were to stand in the hallway, half of the students would keep quiet out of fear.

Based on their reactions, Ning Ning pushed her glasses and adjusted her expression, causing her to have an even stricter and more grim expression. The lesson plan in her hands looked like a cane to the students. She stepped up on the dais and looked across the classroom, not a single student dared to look at her.

"Let's start the lesson." Ning Ning said imposingly, "Attention."

With a rumble of chairs, the students stood up and said in a

uniformed voice, "Good morning, Teacher."

Next, she began to read directly from the book. Indeed, she read everything on the lesson plan word for word, letting her students take notes through listening. She did not write anything on the blackboard—because her handwriting was different from Yun Lin, she was trying to minimise any writing on the blackboard so that no one would notice the difference.

This method of teaching was obviously not the same as what Yun Lin normally did, but no one dared to point it out. Ning Ning looked at the students as she deliberately read a word from a poem wrongly. A few top students glanced up at her, but all of them chose to remain silent, no one dared to correct her.

Their reactions proved Ning Ning's hypothesis, Teacher Yun Lin who was bullied by (other) adults was actually an imposing person to the adolescents.

At this time, the school bell rang. Ning Ning closed the lesson plan. "Attention."

With another rumble of chairs, all the students stood up again. "Goodbye, Teacher."

The effectiveness of this lesson was of course bad. What was worth celebrating was that they would not need to go through this suffering again, because summer vacation would start the day after tomorrow. The students could rest for at least a month, and Ning Ning could use this month to practise writing on a blackboard to get used to the curriculum. She strived to not let her students notice anything weird in the next lesson.

But things always happened out of a person's expectations.

The funeral from before was the end of Yan Qing, but it was also her beginning...

"Will you marry me?"

Ning Ning was completely shocked when the words came out of the other person's mouth. She only answered with a *huh* after a very long time, then asked with a blank expression on her face, "What did you just say?"

"It was love at first sight when I saw you at the funeral." A smartly-dressed Pei Xuan in gold-framed glasses was standing in front of her, he looked at her with a sincere expression. "Will you marry me and become my wife?"

Ning Ning felt sweat rolling down her back.

She realised that she could not reject him.

It was not that she couldn't, it was Yun Lin who couldn't.

While Ning Ning was doing spring cleaning, she found Yun Ling's diary. Ning Ning had never thought that this language teacher who looked like a serious old-fashioned nun from the middle ages actually had a maiden's heart.

Her diary was full of entries of her crush.

Her crush was...her roommate's—Yan Qing's—boyfriend, Pei Xuan.

"1st January, sunny day. I fell in love with Mr Pei Xuan at first sight."

"4th February, rainy day. I met Mr Pei on the streets, he was accompanying Yan Qing on a shopping trip. The umbrella in his hands was covering her completely while his shoulders were wet. I quickly bought an umbrella from a shop nearby, but I could not give him the umbrella even after they walked into the room."

"16th February, cloudy day. Yan Qing brought back a box of imported chocolate, she said it was from Mr Pei. She gave me one, I could not bear to eat it, I have been keeping it."

"16th March, rainy day. The chocolate melted... hmph."

"4th April, cloudy day. Yan Qing told me Mr Pei proposed to her. I'm so envious of her, I also want to have a perfect love life with such a perfect person, then have the perfect wedding."

The book was filled with love that was difficult to express.

How could a person like her reject a proposal from the person she loved?

...She could not reject him based on her emotions, so she could only reject him based on morality. Ning Ning hugged herself tightly and turned her face around. She bit down on her lip and said, "Yan Qing had just passed away, we really shouldn't, at this time..."

Pei Xuan was taken aback, then let out a bitter laugh. "Apologies, I was too impatient."

The two of them were standing under the streetlight on the road by the school. The sky had already turned dark, the students had already gone home for vacation, every classroom was in pitch-black darkness, only the staff dormitory was still lit.

Ning Ning remained silent for a while, then she suddenly asked

him, "Why me?"

Pei Xuan was someone whom someone else could fall in love at first sight with, but Yun Lin was not such a person. Her looks were extremely ordinary, she was slightly plump, she dressed in a very old-fashioned manner so she looked like a middle-aged *auntie*¹ going to the grocery despite being in her twenties.

At least an *auntie* would have a kind look in her eyes, Yun Lin's eyes were a little fierce.

It was the type of eyes possessed by a headmaster whom the students were afraid of.

"I'm not pretty, my personality is not cute, why did you pick me?" Ning Ning looked at him doubtfully.

This was a very normal response. Even if it were Yun Lin herself, she would probably agree to the proposal at first then suspect that he was playing with her.

"... I am just tired." Pei Xuan suddenly sighed. He slouched his usually straight posture, looking like he was overwhelmed, "Yan Qing is pretty and cute, but she...I just want to look for an ordinary girl now."

Once he finished speaking, he looked up at Ning Ning with a tired and gentle look, "Someone like you."

Ning Ning seemed to be embarrassed from being stared at, she looked down shyly...she had to do that, because that was probably the best confession Yun Lin had ever heard in her life.

Even if you were this ordinary, I would still love you.

If you didn't think too deeply about it, this would be like a fairytale. A fairytale about the person whom I fell in love at first sight with who also fell in love at first sight with me.

Right, if you didn't think too deeply about it...

¹Auntie is a general way of referring to older woman in Chinese culture, similarly to how the Japanese use *obaa san*.

Chapter 61

61: Looking at You

If you didn't think too deeply about it, everything seemed normal.

But once you did, everything was not right.

During the weekend, in a small restaurant.

"What would you like to eat?" Pei Xuan flipped through the menu in his hands.

"Anything will do." Ning Ning looked down shyly. She was like an obedient student in front of him, she had her legs put together, placing her hands on them.

Pei Xuan glanced at her with a smile, then he told the waiter beside him, "Then we will have spicy chicken cubes¹, boiled fish, poached chilli and a spicy and sour vermicelli...is that enough?"

Ning Ning nodded with a smile, but her heart sank.

Yun Lin was a person who could not live without spicy food.

Ning Ning did not know this in the beginning, she only found out after she went out for a meal with a colleague. Her colleague exclaimed and asked her, "Did you have a change in taste? Are you not going to add chilli to your rice?"

She was the kind of person who even needed to add chilli oil on her rice.

...How did Pei Xuan know about this? Did he know her? Or did he investigate her beforehand?

First was the spicy chicken cubes. Ning Ning had a piece, but her eyes were locked on Pei Xuan. She discovered that he could not handle spicy food. It didn't take long for him to be gulping down water due to the spiciness, thus she took the opportunity to ask, "Do you not like spicy food?"

"They are alright." Pei Xuan's mouth was slightly red, he took another swig of his glass of water.

"I, on the other hand, like spicy food quite a bit." In actual fact, Ning Ning hated spicy food, but she added a spoonful of spicy chicken

cubes along with the chilli oil onto her rice without a change in expression, as if she was the real Yun Lin. She mixed the rice and oil together, took a bite then asked as if she was joking, "This meal really suits my taste, how do you know what I like to eat?"

"Yan Qing had mentioned you to me." Pei Xuan said with a smile, "She said that you were her best friend."

This was a passable excuse.

But if you think more deeply on this, it would make you feel uncomfortable...

Exactly what kind of person would go after his wife's best friend after the former had passed away?

"...Did you love Yan Qing?" Ning Ning asked suddenly.

Pei Xuan fell silent for a long time. He only smiled when all the dishes were served, the smile had a trace of sorrow and relief.

"I loved her." He said.

"...Oh." Ning Ning slowly lowered her head, looking a little down.

"...After all, I am but a regular man, there will be times where I get smitten by a beauty." A wide palm slowly reached over and covered the back of Ning Ning's hand. She looked up and saw Pei Xuan smiling at her, his smile was gentle and fragile. "But now I've realised, I need someone who is gentle and reliable inside rather than one who is unreliable outside... I need you."

Pei Xuan sent Ning Ning back to the school after the meal.

"Your face is bright red." Pei Xuan said while laughing.

Ning Ning looked down with embarrassment, she pulled her hair behind her ear to reveal her bright red cheek.

Although her face was red from eating the chilli, it suited her expression and gesture in this moment, it was enough for people to mistake her as a young girl passionately in love.

...Though from the way she was dressed, one could also say she was an *auntie* passionately in love.

He gave her a hug when they parted ways.

Although it was the summer vacation and there were not many students going in and out of the school—there was only a few students who were there to play basketball—but Ning Ning's body still stiffened, she pushed him away and said in a soft voice, "Don't do that,

someone will see us."

"A while more." He hugged her tightly. It was as if he was absorbing the will to live from her, he only reluctantly loosened his grip after a long while. He smiled at her gently. "It's the weekend tomorrow, I'll come and pick you up."

Ning Ning could not help but hug herself tightly as she watched him leave. She felt like her body was entwined by a snake, it was numb and uncomfortable.

The most difficult part of the movie titled <<Yun Lin>> was Ning Ning's true feelings. It was the complete opposite of what she was supposed to portray.

She knew that there was something wrong with this man, but she had to act as if she was infatuated with him, she also had to act as if she was slowly getting conquered by him. Honestly, that was a really disgusting feeling, but she could not show it on her face, she could not even show it in her eyes.

She rubbed the goosebumps on her arms as she turned around and returned to the dormitory. She wished that tomorrow wouldn't come, she wished that he would not come tomorrow.

But he still came.

He stood at the entrance of the dormitory with a bouquet of lilies in his left hand, a bag of breakfast in his right hand.

"Let's have breakfast first." He shook the bag of breakfast at Ning Ning.

He was very considerate. He bought two sets of breakfast—one for Ning Ning, the other for Li Ping Ping who stayed in the same dormitory—but the meal was very unpleasant for the both of them. Ning Ning did not like steamed buns with chilli fillings, Li Ping Ping stared at Ning Ning the whole time they were eating. She seemed to want to mince Ning Ning and stuff her into a steam bun then eat it.

"Will you come back today?" Li Ping Ping asked Ning Ning as she was about to leave, "You won't come back late into the night right?"

"I won't, I won't." Ning Ning thanked Li Ping Ping in her mind, she had a reason to come back today. "I will come back after dinner, don't lock the door."

Li Ping Ping smiled at her in a weird way then waved at her.

Pei Xuan's car was stopped at the foot of the building, he opened

the door for Ning Ning then entered by the driver's side.

"Where are we going today?" Ning Ning asked as she put on her seatbelt.

"My house." Pei Xuan said.

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment. She turned around and looked at him. Perhaps it was an illusion, the rear view mirror reflected the side of his face, it was cold and lustrous, like the scales of a snake.

The car started, Ning Ning blinked continuously, this was what she did when she felt nervous.

"Why...did you suddenly want to bring me to your house?" She asked.

"It's my house now." Pei Xuan said ambiguously as he drove, "It might be your house in the future."

Ning Ning looked down shyly, but in her mind she thought, "Let something go wrong, let anything go wrong! The car could run out of gas, get into a traffic accident—This will not do... quickly give me a call, Principal! Tell me the school is opening early!"

Nothing went wrong. The car safely stopped in front of a beautiful small villa.

"Don't worry." Ning Ning thought to herself, "Li Ping Ping saw me go out, so nothing will happen to me, because she was the first implication he would run into if something happened to me."

She felt much better after thinking that. The car door beside her was opened, Pei Xuan smiled at her. "Come, you can alight from the car now."

They entered the villa together. It was a typical western villa. It had a fireplace, a European sofa, French windows, but there were no oil paintings on the walls, there were photo frames hanging on them instead. Ning Ning stood in front of one of the photo frames, there was a pretty girl in the photo. She was wearing a floral dress, sporting playful little curls in her hair. One would look like a village girl if they did not have the figure or demeanour while wearing this sort of dress, but she looked like a fairy in it.

"Yan Qing put them up." Pei Xuan said from behind her. "She had hoped that the villa was filled with her."

It would have been better if he did not say anything, Ning Ning's

had goosebumps again as he said that.

She even felt that the woman in the photo frames was blinking at her.

"Alright, let me give you a tour of the villa." Pei Xuan pressed down on her shoulders and shifted her to a specific direction, his laughter rang out from behind her. "If you don't like it, I can take them down later...and change them to your photos."

"Better not to." Ning Ning said frantically, "I'm not as pretty as her, it wouldn't look good if you hung my photos."

"No." Pei Xuan said with a smile, "Your eyes are much more beautiful than hers, I like being stared at by you."

"You say that as if you only like my eyes." Ning Ning turned her head and looked at him.

"No, I like everything about you." He smiled, but did he really mean what he said?

Ning Ning quickly toured the entire villa under his guidance. Be it upstairs or downstairs, the entire villa gave her a suspiciously familiar feeling. But where did this feeling come from? Ning Ning got her answer when he opened the door to a room.

It was a bridal chamber.

The word happiness was put up on the wall, it was also on the pillow.

The bed was bare, there were no groom or bride.

It was what was on the poster of < <The Person by the Pillow> > !

"Yan Qing picked this villa. I specially had someone renovate it the way she liked after buying it...Ah, apologies." Pei Xuan turned around and smiled apologetically, "I should not have mentioned her, did I dampen your spirit?"

Mentioning another woman's name in front of a woman, naturally Ning Ning expressed a little jealousy. She then very quickly pretended to be magnanimous. "It's fine, I also want to hear about what happened to Yan Qing from you. To be honest, what happened to her was too sudden, I completely did not expect..."

Ning Ning lowered her head and covered her mouth, sighing heavily.

"That's right." Pei Xuan let out a sigh as well, he looked at the

bridal chamber and said, "I also completely did not expect that she would die so suddenly."

Ning Ning closed her eyes and thought: *How could she be dead.*

Yan Qing was the main character for < <Person by the Pillow> > . The movie would have ended if she was dead.

Since the movie had not ended, since Ning Ning was still able to stand here, it meant that Yan Qing was, in fact, still alive. She might be somewhere in the villa watching them right now.

Indeed.

Ning Ning opened her eyes and looked at the white wedding bed.

She might be hiding there, waiting for someone to turn off the lights and lie on the bed, so she could sing quietly to the person in the black of the night.

"Looking at you, person by the pillow."

No matter what Pei Xuan said in his attempt to persuade Ning Ning to stay for dinner was rejected by her—as the villa gave her quite a bad feeling. She also thought of a reason beforehand, "If I don't go back soon, it will reflect poorly on me if people were to gossip."

Pei Xuan could only send her back to the school as he could not convince her to stay.

Ning Ning opened the door to her dormitory room only to find that it was pitch black on the inside. Ning Ning switched on the lights to find out that Li Ping Ping was not in the dormitory. She looked at the clock on the wall only to be aware that it was only eight plus in the night. She went over her teaching materials for a while, but maybe she was too tense previously, she was yawning repeatedly now that she had the chance to relax.

"Forget it, let's wash up and sleep." She told herself, "I will go over this tomorrow morning."

She switched off the lights after washing and rinsing, lay on the bed and fell asleep in no time.

The clock on the wall slowly ticked until it was twelve. The door to her room slowly opened, a figure silently entered.

At first Ning Ning thought she was hallucinating until she heard someone else breathing very close to her, so close...as if it was by her pillow.

Ning Ning could not help but open her eyes and stared at the wall in front of her.

She was sleeping on her side, the breathing was now behind her and on her neck.

Should she turn back?

Ning Ning struggled in her mind for a very long time before turning around.

She saw someone else lying on her pillow, a person sporting playful little curls in her hair who was wearing a floral dress was looking back at her.

1This is actually a specific Chinese dish named Laziji. Laziji is a dish of Sichuan cuisine. It is a stir-fried dish, which consists of marinated then deep-fried pieces of chicken, dried Sichuan chilli peppers, spicy bean paste, Sichuan peppers, garlic, and ginger

Chapter 62

62: Amnesia

"Wa!!" Ning Ning.

"Wa!!" The other party.

Ning Ning screamed because she was frightened.

The other party screamed because she was kicked off of the bed.

"Yun Lin, is there something wrong with you?!" The other party hurled abuse at her, the voice sounded a little familiar...

Ning Ning felt around and switched on the table lamp, she also hurled abuse at the other party after getting a good look at their face, "Li Ping Ping, is there something wrong with you?!"

The person who got up from the floor wasn't anybody else, it was actually her roommate, Li Ping Ping!

Not only did she curl her hair, she was also wearing a floral dress similar to what Yan Qing wore. She looked exactly like the photo that was hung on the wall in Pei Xuan's house!

"...Why did you dress up like Yan Qing?" Ning Ning looked at her doubtfully and furiously, "Do you want to scare me to death?"

Li Ping Ping looked like she had been crying, her eyeliner had smudged into two lines of tears, she stared at Ning Ning coldly.

"I can't dispute him liking Yan Qing, Yan Qing is very pretty after all, any man would like her. But what are you?" She suddenly said, "If he wanted to look for an ordinary girl, why must it be you, why can't it be me?"

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment, after she came back to her senses she asked, "You went to look for Pei Xuan?"

Ning Ning realised what happened after she pondered on it. "No wonder you asked what time I was coming back. You went to look for him the moment I came back?"

She even dressed up specifically like this when she looked for him, it was simply obvious at a glance what she had wanted to do.

Li Ping Ping had no trace of embarrassment even after her

intentions were exposed, she even let out a cold laugh and looked at Ning Ning with a very weird look.

"He said I was too scheming, but how are you any better?" She said while staring at Ning Ning, "Yan Qing's incident was clearly done by both of us."

Ning Ning was stunned by those words.

"...What do you mean by that?" She asked in a low voice.

"Feigning ignorance, you can continue pretending." Li Ping Ping continued to laugh coldly. "But you can't keep this up. If Mr. Pei were to pick you in the end, I would definitely tell him the truth."

...You should tell me the truth first!!

Li Ping Ping did not specifically say what the truth of the situation was, or maybe she thought that both of them clearly knew what had happened so there was no need to say more.

It was not something Ning Ning could ask directly, she could only keep it in her heart and prepare to ask about it indirectly in the future.

In the end, both of them tossed and turned restlessly in bed that night, neither managed to fall asleep.

The two of them were embroiled in a cold war in the next few days—or it would be more accurate to say that Li Ping Ping was fighting a cold war one-sidedly. Ning Ning could not pry anything of value from her mouth, all she could get were sarcasm and mocking comments. As the anxiety accumulated, school reopened.

"Attention!"

"Good morning, Teacher!"

Although there were a lot of things bothering her, she had to continue living her life, she had to continue acting in this movie.

"Turn to page forty." Ning Ning held a textbook in her hands as she began the lesson.

It was a good thing that it was a language lesson at junior high school level. After a month of effort, she could teach like a teacher. It wasn't very well done, but it wasn't poor either. After enduring to the end of the lesson, she used the chalk to leave homework on the blackboard, then said, "Class monitor, please collect the summer holiday homework."

After a wave of sounds—of drawers being pulled open and students

going through their school bags—the class monitor came over with a stack of homework.

Ning Ning was slightly taken aback when she saw the other party.

...*Wen Yu*?

From 1987 to 1990, then from 1990 to 1994, the Wen Yu in front of her was different from the last time she saw him, he had already become a pretty boy.

His hair and eyelashes were as fine as before, his already fair skin was further accentuated by the black school uniform he was wearing. A boy with this kind of looks would usually seem gentle and reserved, they would even seem a little feminine, but he was emanating a sort of 'do not approach' aura, diluting his gentleness and reservation.

"Teacher." He looked up with his delicate face and asked her blandly, "Where do I bring them to?"

Ning Ning came back to her senses, "Bring them to my office."

They walked into the office one after the other, students and teachers were gathered at the field due as it was time for radio exercise, the office was empty but for the two of them.

Wen Yu bent down and placed the stack of homework on her desk. As he got up to leave, a voice rang out from beside him, "Does everyone know about the incident with Teacher Yan Qing?"

Wen Yu turned and looked at Ning Ning beside him, "...We do."

"Can you give me your opinion on it?" Ning Ning spoke very casually, as if she only wanted to know the impressions the students had of Yan Qing.

"...I have no opinions on Teacher Yan Qing." Wen Yu stared at her for a while. "I have a little opinion on you."

Ning Ning was shocked.

She had treated Wen Yu as someone mature all these while, so her tone was inevitably a little intimate, she even asked about his opinion without thinking about it. When she put aside her earlier perception of him, she then realised that Wen Yu was looking at her with a very cold expression, it even had a trace of ...disgust.

If the other students were to hate her, then that would be excusable, because she was playing a scary homeroom teacher, but it shouldn't be the case for Wen Yu. He was not the kind of person who would hate or be disgusted with a teacher for being too strict or for

giving too much homework.

In other words, was there another reason for it?

"What opinion do you have of me?" Ning Ning asked, "Could you tell me?"

"Teacher Yan Qing is already dead." He looked at Ning Ning seriously. "Can you stop already?"

Ning Ning fell silent for a moment before asking, "Did I do anything to Teacher Yan Qing?"

Wen Yu immediately turned away and looked at the door, seemingly not wanting to talk to her, it even felt that it was unbearable for him to be in the same room as Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked at him for a moment. She suddenly flipped open a lesson plan, and wrote a sentence on it with a red pen. She handed the lesson plan to him, "Look."

Wen Yu took a glance at the sentence and was slightly taken aback.

The lesson plan had a lot of notes Yun Lin had left behind, they were written with a blue pen. Ning Ning copied a part of the notes with a red pen. Comparing the two—the handwriting was different.

They were not completely different, there were at least a few words that were around the same, but the other words only had a fifty percent similarity.

"Ask me a question." Ning Ning said.

"...What?" Wen Yu looked at her doubtfully, he didn't know what she was trying to pull.

"Ask me a question." Ning Ning repeated, "Ask me questions...you think I should be able to answer."

Wen Yu stared at her for a moment before asking hesitantly, "Who was the student who committed theft last term?"

Ning Ning, "I don't know."

"Whose belongings did the person steal?" Wen Yu asked again.

Ning Ning, "I don't know."

Wen Yu, "How much is the fee for make-up lessons here?"

Ning Ning, "I don't know."

Wen Yu suspected that she was making a fool out of him, he stiffly

asked, "Who was number one at the end of the last term's examinations?"

Ning Ning, "Cao Xiao Dong."

Wen Yu, "How many essays did you assign for summer vacation homework? What were the names?"

Ning Ning, "Eight of them, their names are < <My School> >, < <My Family> >..."

The question and answer lasted for a period of time, the end of the radio exercise rang out, Ning Ning asked with a smile, "Have you figured it out?"

Wen Yu looked at her with a complicated expression.

"I've lost my memory." Ning Ning had a calm look. "I didn't lose all of my memory, but there is a portion that is missing."

There was a limit to her understanding of Yun Lin.

The limit was Yun Lin's diary.

Although Yun Lin had written her habits in her diary, she did not write down everything that happened in her life, especially the little things that she didn't care about.

Moreover, ever since Pei Xuan appeared, her diary had completely become a diary about her crush on him. From the previous term to the present, she used almost every page and every word in the diary to write about her feelings towards Pei Xuan, she did not care about anything else.

So there was a gap in the memory of the 'Yun Lin' Ning Ning was acting as.

She had no memory of what happened in the period of January to July.

"...January to July." Wen Yu pieced the clues together as expected. "You don't remember anything from this period in time?"

"I don't remember." Ning Ning said.

Wen Yu looked at her doubtfully. He looked like he was trying to determine whether she was telling the truth by the look on her face.

"I know you have an opinion on me, but there must be a reason for it right?" Ning Ning looked at him sincerely. "Can you tell me what happened, let me know the entire process, let me know why I'm so hated by people?"

Wen Yu lowered his head and thought about it. Before he could finish thinking, a commotion sounded out from the corridor outside the office. The students had returned from the field, a few teachers had entered the office one after the other.

"...Let's talk after school." Wen Yu looked at the movement outside of the door. "Look for me after school, we'll talk about your questions then."

Then he turned back and stared at Ning Ning, "You can forget everything, but you cannot forget about that incident...you cannot live a guilt-free life after what you've done."

Chapter 63

63: Violence

Ning Ning arrived at the classroom after school.

There were still people cleaning it up. She told them, "That's enough for today, the few of you can go home now."

Ning Ning and Wen Yu were the only people remaining in the classroom after that group of people left.

"Tell me." She pulled out a chair and sat down beside him, "I'm listening."

"Rumours." Wen Yu looked at her and bluntly said, "Rumours regarding Teacher Yan Qing started spreading from you."

It was the evening, the lights were not switched on in the classroom, the night scenery (outside) slowly transformed into shadows, sneaking in through the window. Occasionally, the rustles of the swaying trees could be heard, they sounded like whispers in the background.

"What did I say?" Ning Ning asked.

"You said Teacher Yan Qing's way of doing things was not very good." Wen Yu said, "Then not long after, there were a lot of photos of her kissing a man pasted in the school."

"That man wasn't her husband right?" Ning Ning muttered, she felt that she had touched the corners of the truth.

"It wasn't. So everyone thought that the rumour you spread earlier was true, they thought that Teacher Yan Qing did not do things properly...but she was an unwilling party!" Wen Yu suddenly opened his school bag, he took out a folded piece of drawing paper, opened it and placed it on the table in front of her.

Ning Ning picked up the piece of paper and took a look. Wen Yu's drawing skills had improved a little bit more, the drawing had skillfully imitated the photo to the point where it was almost indistinguishable.

The drawing was of the photo of a man and a woman kissing. It looked romantic at first glance, but upon closer inspection, one could

feel uneasiness, but where did this uneasiness come from?

"They are not a couple at all. Teacher Yan Qing was most probably taken by surprise, that was why her eyes were that wide open while trying to push him away with both her hands." Wen Yu analysed the drawing bit by bit, finally he concluded, "It was not like what you said at all."

"Preconceived without context." Ning Ning sighed.

These kinds of tricks might not be common in the current era she was in, but it was everywhere in the internet era she belonged to.

The photo you uploaded on the internet might be edited, your comments might be taken out of context, then they might get paired with others' speculations anonymously, after which you would become the target of a witch hunt.

You would get hurt while the other person hid behind the internet as they laughed at you.

"If it was only a rumour, people would forget after listening." Ning Ning muttered, "If it was only a photo, people would quickly realise that the photo doesn't look right, you can only illicit a response by following the rumour with a photo, viciously choking the person to death...heh, this incident was obviously calculated."

Yun Lin was not innocent.

If Yan Qing was really dead, Yun Lin had to take some responsibility.

Ning Ning felt that it was strange, what was the motive for doing this? Was it jealousy? Was it hatred? Was it anything deeper?

"...Why?" Wen Yu's voice suddenly rang out beside her, it sounded somber and pained, "Why does everyone believe you but not me?"

"Because it's much easier to incite a crowd compared to protecting a person." Ning Ning said, "A lot of people don't know the truth, they would just join in for fun, how many people would that add up to? They do not care, they do not need to take any responsibility anyway. It is much more difficult to protect a person. Unless it's someone who really likes you, any other person would protect themselves, they would not risk themselves by coming out and speaking up for you..."

As she said that, Ning Ning turned and looked at him, "Do you...want to speak up?"

This short sentence struck Wen Yu like a lightning. He froze on the

spot, his expression went through a few changes. It started from self-doubt, then slowly turned into a determination that did not belong to someone his age. He used all of his strength to clench his fist. It looked as if he was trying to squash his unease, like he was trying to hold onto his courage tightly.

In the end, he stood up.

He took the drawing paper back from Ning Ning and refolded it. He carefully placed it back into his schoolbag then flung the bag over his back and walked towards the door.

Ning Ning remained seated as she watched him leave.

As he walked out of the door, he suddenly turned back and looked at Ning Ning.

"Teacher." He asked, "Why did you do that to Teacher Yan Qing?"

"Why?" Ning Ning leaned back on her chair and looked at the ceiling. She went along the lines of Yun Lin's thinking, she murmured, "Maybe it was jealousy, maybe something happened between the two of us, maybe there was no particular reason at all and I was just trying to play a bad joke on her."

That last line of reasoning was too disgusting, it was disgusting beyond Wen Yu's imagination, he could not help but show his extreme indignation.

"Teacher." He said coldly, "You might really have lost your memories, or you might have chosen to forget what you have said, the kind of joke you had played on Teacher Yan Qing, but..."

He slowly raised his hand and put it on his chest.

"But to the victim...this kind of hurt would always stay here." His expression was equally in pain, it looked like he felt it as if it had happened to him.

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment.

The Wen Yu in front of her was overlapping with the Wen Yu on the movie poster.

Getting trapped in a swamp created by rumours, having difficulties speaking out with his own voice, before finally getting swallowed by the swamp...the same kind of pain, he had once experienced it, that was why he felt as if it had happened to him!

The difference was that he could not speak out at that time.

But now, he was ready.

Ning Ning could not help but smile. Wen Yu's method of doing things was completely different from the people around him, but this was the true Wen Yu. He made her feel warm, because his existence was a ray of light.

"Go look for your father." She said abruptly.

Wen Yu tilted his head and looked at Ning Ning doubtfully.

"A child's voice is very small, but every child can control a colossal creature—a parent." Ning Ning smiled at him. "Go ahead, I will be waiting for you."

Wen Yu fixed his gaze on her for a long while before turning around and leaving.

"Hold on." A voice rang out from behind him.

He stopped in his tracks as he listened to Ning Ning speaking from behind him, "Incidentally, I'll tell you something. I'm not the only one who spread the rumours."

There was also Li Ping Ping.

She previously said 'the incident with Yan Qing was clearly done by the both of us', the incident she was referring to was most probably the spreading rumours and planting of evidence.

There must be a mastermind among the two of them, was it Yun Lin or Li Ping Ping?

Based on their personalities, Ning Ning was inclined to think it was Li Ping Ping as she was always ordering Yun Lin around. On the contrary, Yun Lin could not deal with Li Ping Ping.

The motive was also very obvious, Pei Xuan.

Coincidentally, Li Ping Ping was in the dormitory when Ning Ning returned. She looked like she was in quite a good mood, she even took the initiative to greet Ning Ning, "You're back."

Something must be wrong. Ning Ning folded her arms as she stood in front of her, she asked, "You told Pei Xuan what both of us did?"

"Hehe, you can tell?" Li Ping Ping sat by the bed as she peeled an apple. Her old habits were back. She used Ning Ning's knife to peel Ning Ning's apple. She smiled proudly. "I can't let you have him to yourself when it was both of us who did the deed."

Someone knocked on the door as Ning Ning was about to delve

deeper into the issue.

She opened the door and saw the last person she wanted to see at this moment—Pei Xuan.

"I have business with you." He looked at Li Ping Ping from the corner of his eyes and hesitated, "Can I speak to you alone?"

"Go ahead." Li Ping Ping answered for Ning Ning, her face was full of bad intentions. "Things like breaking up are better to be done quickly. The longer you drag it out, the worse it is for the both of you..."

Ning Ning glanced back at her, then walked out behind Pei Xuan.

The two of them walked around the empty campus.

Ning Ning waited for him to mention breaking up, but the first words to come out of his mouth were, "Is it cold?"

Then he took off his coat and placed it on her shoulders.

Ning Ning looked at him doubtfully. This didn't seem like what someone who wanted to break up would do.

"I take it that you have not eaten?" Pei Xuan asked gently, "Where would you like to eat?"

"...We could eat anywhere nearby." Ning Ning answered.

It was also like this at the dinner table. He politely helped her with food. He ordered her favourite spicy food. He choked so much that he had to drink water, but he did not complain. He was still as caring, as if he was still deeply in love with her.

Ning Ning trembled as the thought entered her mind.

...A malicious woman who conspired to frame his dead wife. It would be fine if he did not know what she did, but why would his attitude not change after knowing what she did? He smiled as much as before, treated her as well as before.

Ning Ning remained silent for a moment before asking, "Did Li Ping Ping tell you what happened?"

Pei Xuan smiled. "She did."

...Then do you have the memory of a goldfish? Do you only remember things in the past seven seconds?

"But you're so silly." Pei Xuan shook the cup in his hand. Not only did he look handsome, his gestures were always elegant, a cheap cup

looked like a wine glass in his hands. He smiled at Ning Ning. "Why did you pick her?"

Ning Ning was taken aback.

"Although she is the type to be easily incited and controlled, she easily loses control as well." Pei Xuan sighed. "You have to pick someone who is more reliable."

...What did he mean by that?

This simply seemed to be implying that she was the mastermind behind this.

Ning Ning did not dare to express the doubt she had. She could show her true self in front of Wen Yu, but she only wanted to act as Yun Lin in front of Pei Xuan. She had to act as Yun Lin.

"Someone who is more reliable would not take part in something like this." Ning Ning said blandly.

"That is true." Pei Xuan passed her the cup, "You can't have the best of both ways, cheers."

Ning Ning clinked cups with him, her thoughts twisted and turned in her mind.

This person looked like he knew everything.

What role did he have in this incident?

...The most important point was, what was going on with his dedicated but illogical love?

"...Anyway, are you not going to break up with me?" Ning Ning probed, "What should I tell Li Ping Ping when she asks about it?"

Chapter 64

64: Accomplice

Pei Xuan placed his cup on the table, his long slender fingers were caressing it as he asked in a slow manner, "Who are you acting as?"

Ning Ning blinked quickly.

"You have been acting like another person in front of me these days. A conservative old-fashioned yes man dressed like a nun who could not be more afraid of Li Ping Ping." Pei Xuan looked at her, seemingly smiling. "But we both know that...you are not that person at all."

Ning Ning's heart thumped.

"I don't know why you dressed up like this. To be honest, I'd rather see you wear that tasteless red and green dress from before." Pei Xuan gestured at her then shook her head, "We know each other so well already, can't you be more honest and open with me?"

A red and green dress...

Ning Ning went back to the dormitory after the two of them went their separate ways. She decided to go through her wardrobe and found an exotic foreign flag, red on the left and green on the right... Wait! Upon closer inspection, it really was a dress! What kind of twisted person would buy this kind of thing?

But no matter how much Ning Ning did not want to admit it, this dress was in her wardrobe. Yun Lin bought it, she might have even worn it in front of Pei Xuan.

So what Pei Xuan said might have been true. Conservative and old-fashioned, being a yes man—that was all to fool others! To fool Ning Ning! The true Yun Lin was nothing like that.

"You're back." Li Ping Ping came out of the bathroom as she finished washing her hair, she seemed to be very anxious to know what happened as there were still bubbles remaining on her head. "How did it go with Mr Pei?"

Ning Ning looked at her while holding the dress.

When two people were together there would definitely be one who

was stronger and one who was weaker. Ning Ning had always thought that Li Ping Ping was the stronger one and she was the weaker one, but was that how it really was?

"A candlelit dinner date." Ning Ning said, "I promised to go over to his house next week. He wants to renovate his living room the way I like it. Give me your opinion, do you think it should be western or eastern style?"

Li Ping Ping was prepared to smile victoriously, but after hearing what Ning Ning had to say, she could only flash a constipated smile.

"...That is impossible!" She had a look of disbelief, or maybe she could not accept what Ning Ning had said. "I know Mr Pei has already broken up with you. Don't lie to me, you're just lying to yourself, you..."

She was interrupted before she could finish.

"If you want us to break up, you should not have asked him." Ning Ning walked up to her and caressed her cheek with her right hand. "You should have asked me."

The two of them were reflected in the mirror on the wall. One was tall, the other was short, one was fatter the other was slimmer, the strong and the weak clashed as they vied to be on top of each other.

"Huh? Ask you?" Li Ping Ping said stiffly. She tried to be strong, but her final sentence had a hint of nervousness, "...Why should I ask you?"

"Because you have already used your last resort to no avail. Pei Xuan did not break up with me." Ning Ning said with a laugh. She did not intentionally try to make herself look strong, but once the other party showed weakness, she naturally looked stronger. "You could only ask me to break up with him."

Li Ping Ping firmly fixed her gaze on Ning Ning's face.

Rage slowly engulfed Li Ping Ping's face as time passed, it seemed like the rage would turn into violence at any moment.

"...I really don't understand." She clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. "You are not beautiful nor kind. Yan Qing treated you as her best friend, the two of you would always sleep on the same pillow, she told you everything. But when you sabotaged her, you did not hold back at all...why would Mr Pei choose you?"

Saying this seemed to have exhausted the last of her energy, Li Ping Ping stumbled a little after she finished speaking. She leaned on the

wardrobe weakly, her body bent over as if she was a forty-five-year-old woman, looking down at both her hands.

"...Why did the same thing happen again even with a redo?" She muttered in a low voice, "You were not the person who gave him flowers at the funeral, but he still chose you. He said he wanted to look for an ordinary and kind girl, but you are not that kind of person. It's useless even after I told him the truth, it's useless no matter what I do..."

She started crying as she spoke.

Ning Ning looked at Li Ping Ping with a look of confusion. She didn't seem to have heard what the other had just said, her mind was already overwhelmed. She felt that she had already guessed the real identity of Li Ping Ping.

The other customer of Life Theater.

The customer had their back faced towards Ning Ning, so she could not determine the age or gender of the customer.

Today she turned around and revealed her true self to Ning Ning.

This customer was Li Ping Ping herself. In her old age, she used the odd-numbered designated ticket's attribute to transmigrate as the younger version of herself.

That was why she said: "Why did the same thing happen again even with a redo?"

This was fortunate and unfortunate at the same time.

She actually ended up in the same spot even with the chance to redo her life...

"I beg you." Li Ping Ping suddenly hugged Ning Ning's arm while she begged with a faceful of tears. "I only have this one chance. Help me, give him up to me. As long as you are willing to give up Mr Pei to me, I will do anything for you."

Ning Ning looked at her silently.

She was looking at the true Li Ping Ping.

After a while she slowly turned over and looked at herself in the mirror—the true Yun Lin.

She was a terrifying woman.

Ning Ning had never met such a person. What she showed in front of the others was but a facade. Even the books in her room, the clothes

in her wardrobe, they were all a facade. Or maybe this was one of her faces, the face which floated on her surface. But she had another face, hidden beneath her old-fashioned face, hidden in the old-fashioned clothes, hidden in the plump body—

What did that face look like?

Pei Xuan might be the only one who had seen it, Pei Xuan might be the only one who knew the answer.

There seemed to be only one choice if she wanted to obtain the answer from him...

Ning Ning looked down at the red and green dress in her hand with a subtle awkward look on her face.

The weekend, Pei Xuan's house.

Ding dong, the doorbell rang.

Pei Xuan who was setting up a candlelight dinner walked over and opened the door, his eyes narrowed as he saw the figure at the door.

Ning Ning stood at the door, she let her hair which was usually tied up in a ponytail down. She had light make-up on her usually bland face, but these weren't the point, the point was that...she was wearing the red and green dress.

"Did you know?" She let out a mocking laugh, "When I was crossing the road just now, one side of the road stopped while the other side of the road started driving when they saw me, I think they saw me as a traffic light."

Pei Xuan was amused by her, he laughed as he gave way, "They were just admiring you, just like me."

Ning Ning walked into the house. She would usually portray herself as a reserved girl in love, but tonight she portrayed a bolder self. She kicked off her shoes as she walked into the villa, her attitude seemed like the female owner naturally returning to her home. From the moment she walked in from the entrance all the way to the dining room, to the way she picked up the wine glass from the table to have a drink.

She let out a long sigh as she finished the entire glass of wine. She turned around and looked behind her.

Pei Xuan leaned on the wall with his arms folded. He was not surprised nor dissatisfied with how she looked now.

She guessed correctly, the two of them had a very special

relationship.

They were not lovers but closer than lovers, they were not husband and wife but closer than husband and wife. If there were to be a more appropriate term, that would probably be—accomplice.

Ning Ning put down the wineglass abruptly and walked towards him. She reached out and grabbed his necktie then viciously pulled him towards herself.

The two of them kissed.

Ferociously, touchingly, ruthlessly, as if they were two venomous snakes kissing each other.

They only separated after five full minutes.

They kissed for so long that when they separated Pei Xuan had difficulties maintaining his usual demeanour. His hair was a little messy, his breathing was a little off-rhythm, even his tie was in a mess. He fixed his gold-framed glasses, overlooking the girl who was also panting with a smile and asked, "Are you satisfied now?"

Ning Ning looked up at him with a smile. Her lipstick was smudged at the corners of her mouth, it was beautiful and charming.

"A perfect lover, a perfect love life, is that satisfactory?" Pei Xuan cleaned Ning Ning's lips with his thumb, his voice had a trace of teasing, "Should I propose to you now?"

This sentence sounded really familiar.

She remembered.

Yun Lin's diary had this sentence written within.

"4th April, cloudy day. Yan Qing told me Mr Pei proposed to her. I'm so envious of her, I also want to have a perfect love life with such a perfect person, then have the perfect wedding."

Ning Ning had once thought that that was a diary about her crush, but now it didn't seem to be the case from the looks of it.

Fourth of April, might be the day the two of them became accomplices. A perfect pair of lovers, a perfect love life, a perfect marriage, was that the reason Yun Lin laid her hands on Yan Qing?

Ning Ning began laughing, "Kneel down."

Pei Xuan was taken aback, then he knelt down and pulled Ning Ning's hand in front of himself, he asked affectionately, "Yun Lin, would you marry me?"

"Yes." Ning Ning said.

Li Ping Ping revisited her life, Ning Ning also revisited Yun Lin's life, who married her best friend's husband after her best friend passed away.

Everything remained unchanged...

But was that truly the case?

Ning Ning slowly turned and looked at the photo frame on the wall, she had the same impression as the last time, it felt as if the Yan Qing in the photo frame had blinked.

Chapter 65

65: Photo Frames

The egg turned golden with a sizzle on the frying pan.

"How many eggs do you want?" Ning Ning stood in front of the pan while wearing an old apron.

"One will do." Pei Xuan's voice rang out from the living room.

Ning Ning made two sunny-side up eggs, she put both on a white porcelain plate. She turned around and walked out of the kitchen. As she was about to walk out she turned to take a glance at a photo frame on the wall.

Within the photo frame was a photo of Yan Qing. She was wearing the same apron as Ning Ning at the moment, in her hand was the same white porcelain plate, on the plate was even the same sunny side up egg—but that wasn't anything strange, Pei Xuan liked to have them.

Ning Ning locked eyes with the Yan Qing in the photo frame for a while before she turned away and left.

Sunlight was shining through the windows into the living room, the long table in the living room was covered by a red-and-white-checked tablecloth, on top were two cups of soya milk and a plate of fried dough fritters.

Pei Xuan was sitting behind the table while reading the newspaper. He peeked out from behind the newspaper when he heard Ning Ning's footsteps, he said with a smile, "Come over, let me give you a good morning kiss."

Ning Ning bent over. He planted a kiss on her face. It was icy cold, there was no warmth, it felt like she got licked by the tongue of a snake.

She looked at a photo frame which was hung on the wall behind him with the corner of her eyes., Within the photo frame was yet another photo of Yan Qing. She was bending over, it seemed like she was waiting for someone to kiss her, it also seemed like she had just been kissed, giddy from the aftertaste with a smile on her mouth.

Just like how Ning Ning was at the moment.

"Alright, let's eat." Pei Xuan used his nose to rub Ning Ning's cheek. "We can discuss the matters of the house over the meal."

Then they had breakfast in front of the photo frame of Yan Qing.

"We can do away with the piano room, should we make it a baking room or a study for you?" Pei Xuan took a bite out of the sunny-side up.

"No need." Ning Ning said, "We are going overseas anyway, we will have to sell the house then. Wouldn't it be a waste of money to renovate the house now?"

"It's not a waste." Pei Xuan said with a smile, "Spending any amount of money is not wasteful as long as it pleases you."

This speech mannerism of an overbearing CEO, it would win the favour of a woman's heart no matter if it was ten years ago or ten years later, but Ning Ning was more curious about another matter.

"By the way." She asked casually, "What exactly do you do for a living?"

Poor Yan Qing, poor Yun Lin and poor Li Ping Ping, three women fell in love with the same man. One fell for his sweet talk, one fell for his striking appearance and one fell for his expensive watches and cars, yet the three of them didn't know what kind of person they fell in love with, they didn't even know what he did for a living.

"I work in a foreign securities company, I'm back this time for a vacation." Pei Xuan smiled, "What's the matter? You're only asking this now?"

They had already informed people of their engagement. There were people who congratulated them and there were those who mocked them. There were those who were envious and those who were jealous. No one mentioned Ning Ning by name anymore, they called her 'gold digger'. Such fine specimen of a man, there were a flock of people who would be willing to marry him even though he was a widower.

"Come, let me calm you down a little." Pei Xuan put his chopsticks down and walked to Ning Ning's side, he put his arm over her shoulders.

They arrived in the piano room. The piano who had lost its owner sat quietly in the corner with a layer of lonely dust on top of it. Pei Xuan retrieved a few documents from a shelf within the room and handed them to Ning Ning. "Look, this is my company's documents

and my visa."

He shoved a pile of documents to Ning Ning. They were all in English, it looked very impressive at a glance. How would Yun Lin who didn't know any English understand any of this? On the other hand, Ning Ning could understand parts of it, but she could only recognise the commonly used words. She did not understand some of the professional terms, thus she could not determine whether the documents were genuine or not.

"You showed this to me knowing that I can't read them." Ning Ning tossed the document back at him with an angry look, but her eyes looked like they were smiling.

"Alright, alright. I'll read them out word by word later, alright?" Pei Xuan pressed down on her shoulders.

"Why not now?" Ning Ning asked.

"We could do it now as well." Pei Xuan turned around and looked at the piano that was tucked away. "How about a recitation, you can provide me with some background music."

Ning Ning had learned how to play the piano for a period of time for the sake of acting, but had Yun Lin ever learned how to play the piano? After steadying herself, Ning Ning sat in front of the piano and reached out with a single finger, she pressed the do re mi fa so keys consecutively. Pei Xuan looked down and read the document accompanied by the sounds of the piano, "...Securities company was established in 1988, the headquarters is located in the world's financial center London..."

Do re mi fa so, do re mi fa so... Ning Ning looked up as she pressed the piano keys, a photo frame was hung on the wall in front of her. Yan Qing was sitting in front of the piano within the photo frame, she faced the camera as she played the piano.

Ning Ning could not help but shudder a little.

...Come to think of it, were there that many photo frames in the room when she came before?

She thought carefully about it, it didn't seem to be the case.

At first there were only photo frames in one corridor, but now? Ever since she agreed to Pei Xuan's proposal, the photo frames in the room were increasing in number. It spreaded out from the vestibule to the corridors, from the corridors to the living room, from the living room to the stairs, spreading out into every corner of the house.

And now, the entire house was filled with her.

No matter where she looked, she would see Yan Qing.

"Why did you stop?" Pei Xuan's voice suddenly rang out beside Ning Ning's ear.

She came back to her senses and realised that she had focused too much on the photo frames on the wall and had forgotten to play the piano.

"What's with these photos?" She did not mask her doubt, because this would definitely be Yun Lin's doubt as well. She pointed to the photo frame in front of her and asked with a trace of jealousy, "Why does it feel like these things have been increasing?"

Pei Xuan looked at the direction she pointed at, he looked like he was smiling and not at the same time.

Ding dong—

The doorbell suddenly rang.

"Hold on." Pei Xuan squeezed Ning Ning's shoulder, he left her in the room to wait for him as he went downstairs. After a while, he walked into the room with an enormous photo frame.

"Look at the gift I have prepared for you." He presented the photo frame in his hands with a smile.

Ning Ning was stunned when she saw the person in the photo frame, "When did you take that?"

The person in the photo frame was not anyone else, it was Ning Ning herself. She was wearing an old-fashioned black dress, standing beside the black piano, supporting herself with a snow-white arm on the piano, the black and white in the photo was very contrasting.

Pei Xuan walked to the wall with the photo frame in hand. He reached out and took down Yan Qing's photo frame and switched them, then took a few steps back and looked at it while tilting his head. He turned back and asked, "Do you think it's a little crooked?"

"... A little." Ning Ning answered.

Pei Xuan immediately walked and adjusted it. "How about now?"

"A little to the left... a little to the right, stop, stop." Ning Ning directed him from behind, "Right there."

Pei Xuan dusted his hands and took a few steps back, he put his arms across her shoulders as he admired his handiwork.

Ning Ning looked at the photo frame with a complicated expression. The new love was hung up on the wall, the old flame was left in the corner of the room. They were framed in a photo frame of the same size, shot beside the same piano and by the same photographer... their husband, Pei Xuan.

"Here." Pei Xuan gave her a pat on her back, "Let me show you a surprise."

The two of them left the piano room. Ning Ning stopped in her tracks as they walked down the stairs. She leaned on the handrails and looked up and down at the things that were lying around in the living room, she could not help but let out a gasp.

On the floor were photo frames of all sizes, every single photo frame had a photo of Ning Ning. A photo was shot in the kitchen, a photo was shot in the living room, a photo was shot in the corridor, a photo was shot in the bedroom...this was only but a portion of it. The entrance to the villa was open, the deliveryman was still continuously bringing in more photo frames.

The originally empty living room was quickly filled up with photo frames.

"Do you like it?" Pei Xuan hugged Ning Ning from behind, he smiled by her ear. "... In the future, the house would have no more Yan Qing, only you."

Ning Ning suddenly turned back to look at him, then her vision slowly shifted up and landed on the huge photo frame behind him. It was the first photo she saw, the curly hair and floral dress...was it an illusion? She felt that the person in the photo was looking back at her again, using a painful and sad expression.

The painful and sad look vanished, because Pei Xuan walked over and took down the photo frame.

"Come." He pointed towards the living room with his chin while hugging the photo frame, "Look for a photo you like."

The two of them spent the entire afternoon taking down all of Yan Qing's photo frames.

Standing in the middle of the living room, surrounded by photo frames of all sizes cramped on the walls framed with photos of herself, was this really romantic? Ning Ning did not know what Yan Qing thought of it, but she could only feel shivers running down her spine.

"It's getting late, I should return." Ning Ning held back her desire to

rub on her goosebumps as she told Pei Xuan, "You should be tired too, you don't have to see me home, I will take a taxi."

Pei Xuan did look pretty tired, he was laid out on the sofa as he nodded, "Then take care on the way back."

Ning Ning acknowledged as she quickly left. As she walked from the living room to the vestibule, she could not help but quicken her footsteps. With all the photo frames staring at her, she could only breathe a sigh of relief after she rushed out of the door.

She slowly turned back and looked at the tightly shut door behind her.

The shadows of the tree branches which were cast on the door seemed like fangs and claws under the moonlight.

"...What exactly are you thinking of?" Ning Ning murmured in a low voice, "What exactly are you trying to achieve?"

A person's actions were dictated by his or her desires.

Yun Lin's desire drove her to sabotage her friend, Li Ping Ping's desire drove her to continuously pursue Pei Xuan, but what about Pei Xuan? What was the reason for him to become an accomplice of Yun Lin? What was the reason for him to propose to Yun Lin? What was the reason for him to continue staying in a suspicious house full of photo frames?

On the other side of the door in a dark room.

Pei Xuan slowly stood up from the sofa. He walked up the stairs step by step and entered the bedroom, he looked at the photo frame hung on the wall.

This was probably the last photo frame of Yan Qing in the house.

She was wearing a white wedding dress in the photo, holding a bouquet of lilies that had dewdrops on it. She was smiling as she looked at Pei Xuan, but her eyes had tears.

...It was not an illusion, they were in fact real tears...

Pei Xuan started smiling with satisfaction.

Chapter 66

66: Clue

The day of the wedding was getting closer. Ning Ning did not feel the excitement of a person who was about to get married, she only felt an anxiety that was getting heavier as the days went by.

"What did you say?" She furrowed her brows, "Who is this letter for?"

Her next door neighbour was standing at her door. She was an old woman who had a mix of white and grey hair. She handed the letter in her hand to Ning Ning with an apologetic look. "My grandson helped me collect my letters, he probably accidentally took Yan Qing's letter along with ours. Since it's her letter, it's not so nice to leave it at my place, look..."

A letter for the dead, if Ning Ning did not accept it, she would probably throw it away.

"Alright." Ning Ning reached out and accepted the letter. "I will give it to her parents."

"Alright. Thank you, thank you." The neighbour breathed a sigh of relief, she finally got rid of the hot potato.

Ning Ning looked down at the letter in her hands after the neighbour left. It was really strange. The letter was pretty recent, it was sent five days ago. The news of Yan Qing's death should have already been sent out then, who would send a letter to a dead person?

She opened the letter and received a shock. Not only was there a letter, there seemed to be a gift as well, that gift was...She didn't have enough time to look at it when a hand reached out from behind her and took the letter away.

Ning Ning turned back and saw Pei Xuan was staring at the letter, then he very naturally kept it and smiled at her. "Why are you still dawdling around? Get dressed, let's go look at the wedding gowns."

Today was the day the two of them were supposed to pick a wedding gown. Ning Ning hesitated in front of the Chinese-style and Western-style gowns. In the end, she picked the Chinese-styled one, it was not because it was her preferred choice, she just did not want to dress up like the Yan Qing in the photo frame...

"We'll take both." Pei Xuan bought both of them, he said with a smile. "I want to see you in both of them."

Pei Xuan was the one who was paying, so they bought both gowns. The Chinese-styled gown was alright, the Western-style one was a little too tight, Ning Ning's current body was too fat to fit, so they went to the tailor the shop recommended. This was not something that could be done in a day or two, they spent a total of a month to tailor the gown to her proportions.

"It looks really good." Pei Xuan gave praise upon seeing Ning Ning come out of the dressing room.

Ning Ning walked towards him with a smile, she paused a little along the way as she felt an itch on her waist, it seemed like the wedding gown had something stuck in it, maybe it was the label? She was not too bothered by it. Pei Xuan paid for the wedding gown without a fuss, then told her while grinning from ear to ear, "So you'll wear this back home today?"

Ning Ning rolled her eyes, "There's no way."

She changed out of the wedding gown in the dressing room, shuddering as she undressed down to her waist. She saw what was stuck at the waist portion of the dress.

"What is this?" The shop staff seemed to have not expected that there would be something in the gown. Ning Ning stopped them when they were about to remove it.

"It's fine, this belongs to me." Ning Ning tore it off and carefully kept it. She thought it over before turning over and told them, "This is a surprise I have prepared for my husband, don't tell him about it."

The shop staff smiled understandingly. "Got it."

She really had her lips sealed, she did not tell Pei Xuan who was waiting outside about it. Ning Ning walked out with a poker face and told him, "Let's go back."

They put the box containing the wedding gown in the backseat before getting in the front seats. The car fired up and drove towards the villa, but they knocked down a bicycle which was travelling at a high speed not a few minutes into the drive. The bicycle laid on its side by the road, the person on the bicycle also fell off. Both of them frantically got out of the car to check on the person. They breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing that the person was not injured.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." Pei Xuan helped the person up, and said

apologetically, "How much does your bicycle cost, I will compensate you for it."

"It's fine." The person was simple and honest, he did not take the opportunity to extort Pei Xuan, he only looked at the newspapers on the floor worriedly.

He was an old newspaper collector, the bicycle might be fine but the newspapers tied to the bicycle were ruined, half of them fell off and were under Pei Xuan's car's wheel. Combined with the fact that it had rained earlier in the day, the newspapers on the ground were full of mud.

"How much for these newspapers?" Pei Xuan immediately took out his wallet. "I will buy all of them."

The newspaper collector was overjoyed, he gave Pei Xuan the price, afterwards he bent over and picked up the newspapers that were still clean and said, "These can still be used, bring them back to wipe your windows..."

He did not just collect old newspapers. Besides the newspapers, there were old books, old workbooks, and even a few... old tickets.

Ning Ning took a step forward, but Pei Xuan was faster than her.

"Let me help you." He bent down and helped him pick up the old books and old newspapers, Ning Ning saw Pei Xuan putting the tickets into his pocket.

"It's all muddy, aren't you afraid of dirtying your clothes?" She walked over and reached into his pocket naturally. She rebuked, "I'm the one who washes the clothes anyway, won't you feel any heartache?"

Pei Xuan immediately grabbed her hand and said with a smile, "I'm a person who wants to be a good husband, how could I let you wash my clothes? I will wash them."

He even gave her hand a kiss upon finishing his sentence.

"You two have such a good relationship." The newspaper collector looked at them enviously.

A good relationship? Are you serious?

Pei Xuan, "Hahahaha..."

Ning Ning, "Hahahaha..."

The two of them returned home, neither bothered with the old

newspapers and old books in the boot. Ning Ning hugged her box which contained the wedding gown and smiled. "I want to try it on again."

"You have already tried it on for the whole day, aren't you tired?" Pei Xuan pressed on his temples impatiently.

"I'm not tired, no woman would ever get tired from trying on clothes." Ning Ning answered.

"Alright." Pei Xuan shrugged. "Quickly finish trying it on, then cook for me, I'm starving."

"Okay." Ning Ning went close to him and kissed him on the cheek, "I will cook your favourite herbal soup later."

The doors opened on both sides of the car, the two of them got out, talking and laughing while they walked briskly back to the villa, as if they had just returned from a vacation. Both of them rescinded their fake smiles once they entered their separate rooms.

Pei Xuan locked his door and walked to his desk with huge strides. He took the few tickets out of his pocket and tossed them on the table, they were wrinkled and muddy which made them look terrible.

He took out a key and opened a drawer. Within the drawer was a letter, it was the letter that someone had sent to Yan Qing after her passing.

There was no letter in the envelope, as Pei Xuan had discarded it long ago.

Pei Xuan picked out a ticket from the pile of tickets on his table, slowly putting it into the envelope along with the other tickets after he cleaned them.

Afterwards, he put the envelope back into the drawer and closed it, locked the drawer and swept the rest of the tickets into the rubbish bin.

On the other side, Ning Ning also locked the room to her door. She tossed the box in her hands on the floor, opened it and felt around for the thing that was stuck in the wedding gown.

It was a Life Theater ticket.

"It's actually the real thing..." Ning Ning inspected the ticket a few times, then she plopped her butt on the floor and bit her finger while she muttered, "What's going on? How did he do it?"

From what she knew, a Life Theater ticket was something that was

very hard to obtain. She did not know where she could buy them from or whom she could buy them from even up till now.

But within this month, Life Theater tickets had been appearing in front of them repeatedly. Not once, but three times.

"The first one was hidden in an envelope, the second in the wedding gown, the third in some old newspapers..." Ning Ning looked at the ticket in hand while questioning it, "What's with the urgency? Why are you taking the initiative? What secrets does this house hold? What exactly did Pei Xuan do to lure you here?"

The ticket did not answer her.

Pei Xuan was even less likely to answer her.

Ning Ning felt very anxious, she thought that she was on the cusp of discovering the truth. She was just missing a few clues, she was on the verge of a breakthrough in her investigations.

Where would she be able to find that important clue?

Knock, knock, knock. Someone knocked on the door, Pei Xuan's voice rang out from the outside, "Why did you lock the door? Do you need me to help pull the zipper up?"

Ning Ning frantically hid the ticket on her then put on a smile on her face as she opened the door. "It's fine, come help me wash the vegetables."

Pei Xuan immediately made a painful expression, "Can you pretend that I never came?"

"No!" Ning Ning grabbed his arm and dragged him to the kitchen.

The two of them washed the vegetables and cooked, looking like intimate lovers from the windows. No one expected that there was a person watching the two of them from outside the window.

Once they had finished dinner, Ning Ning went out to take the trash, and that was when the person jumped at her.

Ning Ning was startled, she asked, "What are you doing?"

"You have to give me an explanation!" With two red eyes and messy hair, Li Ping Ping looked like a fugitive now. "You promised me, you promised me!"

"What did I promise you?" Ning Ning struggled to pry Li Ping Ping's fingers off her arm.

"You told me that if I beg you, you would break up with him!" Li

Ping Ping said as she choked Ning Ning, "You lied to me! You are about to get married to him already! You even bought a wedding gown!"

How long exactly had she been loitering around the house? She even knew that they had bought a wedding gown.

"What are you doing?" Pei Xuan's voice rang out from beside them, he seemed to have come out after hearing the commotion. He shouted from afar, "Let her go!"

Ning Ning felt bitterly disappointed. Even though his face looked anxious, his feet weren't, he walked towards them with a speed slower than someone who came out (of the house) to bring in the newspaper.

But Li Ping Ping was deceived by his looks, or maybe she was unwilling to show the ugly side of her to him, thus she loosened her grip and turned tail to run.

"*Cough, cough, cough, cough.*" Ning Ning touched her neck as she coughed non-stop.

"Are you alright?" Pei Xuan had come to her side, he had her in a bridal carry before she noticed, and brought her from the outside back to his bedroom. He placed her on the bed and looked at her with pity, but also gently. "That woman was too much... waiting for me here."

This time his movements quickened, he rushed out of the door. When he came back, he was holding a boiled egg in his hand. He rolled it over the bruise on Ning Ning's neck and said, "This might be an old-fashioned method, but it is quite effective. My mom treated my bruises when I fell down during my childhood this way. Don't move. Just sit there, I'll do it."

This kind of gentleness and care was completely different from his indifference when he was outside.

Why was he so different on the different side of the doors?

Ning Ning suddenly turned back and looked at the huge photo frame which was hanging behind her.

Yan Qing was wearing a white wedding gown, holding a bouquet of lilies as she smiled at Ning Ning from within the photo frame.

"Ah." Ning Ning thought to herself, "I found it."

She had found the clue.

The clue was—Pei Xuan would only treat her kindly in front of the photo frames.

Chapter 67

67: Instigation

What was the secret behind the photo frame?

An opportunity to discover the truth was laid right in front of Ning Ning.

Pei Xuan suddenly received a notice from the company, requesting him to report back to the main office.

"When are you coming back?" Ning Ning was holding a grey coat in her hand.

"I'm leaving tonight, I will return in four or five days." Pei Xuan said as Ning Ning put on the coat for him. He laughed. "Why don't you stay here to help me look after the house?"

Ning Ning pretended to hesitate before smiling. "Deal."

They kissed farewell before Pei Xuan left.

Ning Ning stood at the door and waved him goodbye, the smile on her face slowly faded when the car disappeared from her view.

She turned around and went back into the house, locked the door, then walked step by step to the corridor full of photo frames.

Usually a person would hang at most three or four photo frames on the walls, no one would fill the walls like Pei Xuan did.

Ning Ning looked into her own eyes in the photo frame for a while before taking it down.

When they changed the photo frames last time, Pei Xuan was the one responsible for changing the frames, while she was only responsible for passing them to him. Pei Xuan seemed to be blocking what was behind the photo frames back then, thus she did not have a good look.

Now she could see clearly.

"This is..." Ning Ning raised a hand and touched the wall behind the photo frame.

On the wall was a peephole.

She touched the peephole, then her vision shifted onto the photo frames by the side. She walked over and took them down one by one.

She took down the photo frames as she walked down the corridor. Big or small, every photo frame ended up on the ground behind her. She abruptly turned her head when she reached the end of the corridor and felt a shiver run down her spine.

Behind her was a wall full of peepholes.

She did not dare to look again after that one look. She turned around and walked towards the kitchen.

No matter if it was the corridor, the kitchen, the piano room or the guest room, the photo frames hung on the walls had been tampered with. The floral dress, the piano, and the right eye of the person in the photo hid a secret.

A hidden peephole.

She finally opened the door to the bedroom.

The snow-white double bed, the pillows decorated with the word 'happiness'.

Along with those was the last photo frame of Yan Qing in the house.

Ning Ning slowly walked towards it. The photo frame which hung on the wall was as tall as a person. The bride inside was looking at Ning Ning quietly, it seemed like she had been expecting Ning Ning to come.

"...Yan Qing." Ning Ning slowly raised a hand, caressing the eye in the photo, "Are you inside?"

That eye flickered as if it was looking at something behind her.

Ning Ning abruptly turned around.

A knife was raised behind her!

"Ah!" Ning Ning screamed. She had narrowly avoided the kitchen knife as it swung down. The knife had slashed the photo frame, the Yan Qing inside the photo frame had her head split open.

A few strands of hair fell to the floor. Ning Ning looked at the other person, feeling unsettled. "Li Ping Ping!"

Li Ping Ping turned around with a knife in hand. She looked very terrifying, her eyes were shining in excitement.

Ning Ning dodged as she moved towards the door while asking, "How did you get in here?"

...How strange, Ning Ning clearly remembered locking the door, how did Li Ping Ping get inside?

Li Ping Ping smiled triumphantly. She took out a bunch of keys from the pocket of her pants and shook it at Ning Ning.

"What do you think?" She asked.

Ning Ning's pupils twinkled.

"Who gave you the keys?" Ning Ning asked in a low voice, "Pei Xuan?"

Li Ping Ping didn't answer her. She put the bunch of keys which belonged to Pei Xuan back into her pocket, then raised the knife and walked towards Ning Ning.

Ning Ning turned tail and ran, but her body was too chubby. She panted as she ran, Pei Xuan's words ringing out in her mind.

"Eat more."

"There is less to feel on a skinny person, I'd like for you to have more meat on your body."

"Come, open up. Let me feed you."

"It's fine, even if you get too fat to walk, I'll piggyback you."

Plates of fat geese, roasted pig, and cake were given to her in the name of love, it made Ning Ning who was originally chubby grew even more fat. She really could not run anymore, she was like a pig waiting to be slaughtered.

Li Ping Ping caught up to Ning Ning within two to three steps, the two of them ended up in a scuffle. Ning Ning was holding on dearly to Li Ping Ping's wrist, the knife was inches away from her. It seemed like if she were to loosen her grip, the knife would stab her in her eye.

"Pei Xuan is just using you!" Ning Ning suddenly roared at Li Ping Ping.

Li Ping Ping was stunned for the moment, the strength of her hand had weakened a little.

But her hesitation was only for a short moment, the murderous gleam gathered in her eyes once again. What could Ning Ning do? Sweat was pouring out of Ning Ning's face, the tip of the knife was getting closer and closer to her eye...

"Yan Qing is alive!" Ning Ning suddenly shouted, "Look at the wall, look at the peephole! She is watching us from behind the wall!"

"That's impossible!" Li Ping Ping blurted out as her eyes couldn't help but look towards the wall.

Coincidentally, the moment she turned around, the photo frame that she had split open fell off the wall with a crash, revealing the peephole behind it.

When Li Ping Ping was caught up looking at the peephole, Ning Ning took the opportunity to grab the knife from her, but Li Ping Ping came back to her senses just in time, the two of them started wrestling again.

Obesity ruined people's lives. In this crucial moment, being a hundred-eighty kilogram was completely useless. Li Ping Ping pushed Ning Ning to the wall. She placed the knife on Ning Ning's neck. She was in no hurry to cut Ning Ning open, instead she breathlessly said, "You are lying to me again. We saw her getting buried together! How could she be alive?!"

The coldness of the blade seeped into Ning Ning's skin, she had goosebumps. She said as she panted, "Did you see her corpse?"

Li Ping Ping, "..."

Ning Ning, "Did you see it or not?"

Li Ping Ping, "How could there be no corpse when there was a coffin?"

"Couldn't it be someone else's corpse?" Ning Ning asked.

Li Ping Ping laughed as she found the loophole this time. "Her parents and her husband were there, how could they mistake the corpse?"

"For the sake of ridding themselves of the scandal." Ning Ning said.

The two of them stopped moving, it seemed like they turned into an oil painting.

"...For such a stupid reason?" Li Ping Ping started laughing.

"Is that reason really stupid?" Ning Ning asked.

She knew that her line of reasoning was a little far-fetched, but no one would be able to cover all grounds in such a situation, she could only try her best to make Li Ping Ping believe in this line of reasoning.

"A person who got involved in such a big scandal, not just herself,

even her family would not be able to take it as well. But the deceased is never affected. No matter the size of the scandal, it would disappear once one was deceased." Ning Ning said.

What she just said was nonsensical, but after careful consideration, it felt like it made some sense. Li Ping Ping seemed to be confused and Ning Ning did not want to give her time to gather her thoughts.

"What are we doing fighting for our lives here? This might even be something that Pei Xuan and Yan Qing had set up!" Ning Ning shouted, "Think about it. If Yan Qing did not die, the two of them would still be husband and wife, what would that make the two of us? The third and fourth party? We might not even be the third and fourth, they just want the two of us to kill each other..."

She turned her head around abruptly and shouted at the wall, "...Let her see!"

A person who had a dark heart would usually think about the darker side of things, Ning Ning might not be telling the truth, but it sounded like the truth to Li Ping Ping.

Li Ping Ping looked uncertain. For the sake of provoking her further, Ning Ning suddenly smacked the wall. "Yan Qing! Are you inside? Yan Qing! Do we look like jokes to you?"

She did not care if anyone answered, she smacked the wall harder and harder.

Li Ping Ping felt distraught from the smacking, she shouted, "Enough! You said she's alive right? Then bring her to me!"

She took a step back and signalled at Ning Ning to walk forward with the knife. Ning Ning turned the house upside down under the coercion of Li Ping Ping. The sweats on her forehead accumulated more intensely as she went through the house, because all she found were a bunch of peepholes, but she could not find the door that led into the walls.

"Let's tear the wall down." Ning Ning suggested, "There's a hammer in the storeroom."

"You think I will let you get your hands on such a thing?" Li Ping Ping mocked.

"But she's just inside!" Ning Ning said, "Why else would there be so many peepholes on the walls? For decoration? Or is it for someone to look out from the inside?"

"..." Li Ping Ping fell silent.

Just when Ning Ning thought she had convinced Li Ping Ping, the knife was pressed on her neck from behind her, Li Ping Ping's voice coldly rang out, "Forget it, I will tear the wall down after I kill you."

In the moment of life and death, Ning Ning roared, "I have an idea!"

The knife on her neck stopped after it gave her a shallow cut.

"You don't have to use such a troublesome method..." Ning Ning said while sweating profusely, "I have a simpler method."

"...What method?" Li Ping Ping asked.

"Pei Xuan." Ning Ning swallowed and said, "Pei Xuan will definitely come back to see if you succeeded."

"...Go on." Li Ping Ping said.

Fancy that Li Ping Ping did not admit that she had been instigated by Pei Xuan. Where would she get her keys from if it was not Pei Xuan and his instigation? Why would Pei Xuan want to come back and check whether she had succeeded?

"You have a lot of doubts, I have a lot of doubts too." Ning Ning said, "I want to ask him, between you, between me and Yan Qing, who exactly does he like? If he likes Yan Qing, why did he lock her up? If he likes me, why does he want you to kill me? If he likes you, why does he want to turn you into a murderer?"

Ning Ning could not see the expression on Li Ping Ping's face as the latter was standing behind her. She waited anxiously for a moment before she heard Li Ping Ping ask in a low voice, "What do you want to do?"

Knowing that Li Ping Ping could not see her face, Ning Ning could not help but silently smile.

The world's most intimate relationship was the relationship between accomplices, the world's most unreliable relationship was a love triangle.

Pei Xuan attempted to make Li Ping Ping his accomplice, but now this accomplice had been incited by Ning Ning to defect.

"Pei Xuan would take at most three to four days to come back." Ning Ning took a deep breath, "When that time comes, this is what we will do..."

Three days later.

The train stopped at the train station, Pei Xuan put down the

newspaper in his hand, alighting the train with his luggage.

This vacation revitalised him, he stood out strikingly from the crowd.

He waved his hand to hail a taxi.

"Where to sir?" The taxi driver asked.

"University-affiliated High School." Pei Xuan said.

The taxi stopped at the entrance of the school. The first thing Pei Xuan did after getting off the taxi was to visit Ning Ning's office. A few teachers were in the office, one of them was marking the students' homework, another two were casually chatting.

"Excuse me." Pei Xuan walked over and asked, "Is Yun Lin around?"

"Yun Lin?" The two teachers stopped talking and looked up at him, "She has not been to school for a few days, you are..."

"I am her fiancé. I just returned from a business trip and want to pick her up." Pei Xuan asked with a face full of doubt, "What was that, she had not been to school for a few days?"

"That's right, it has been around three days." One of the teachers said, "Tell her to quickly come back when you find her, the Dean wants to talk to her."

"Alright, alright." Pei Xuan nodded frantically before asking, "Do you know where she could have gone? Does her roommate know?"

"Her roommate? Ah, Li Ping Ping." The teacher shook her head again, "Li Ping Ping has not been to school for a few days as well."

"Is that so..." Pei Xuan looked down with disappointment, then he told the two teachers politely, "Alright. Thank you, I will go home and see if she is at my house."

Pei Xuan walked out of the school, preoccupied with his thoughts after bidding the two of them farewell. A few people recognised him and even engaged in small talk with him.

The moment he got on a taxi, his worried expression disappeared. He put one leg over the other and leisurely said, "Go to Shade Avenue."

The taxi stopped in front of his house.

After he got off the taxi, Pei Xuan stood in front of his house for a moment but did not take his keys out—he had long given his keys away.

He took a look at his watch. It was almost time, he counted up to sixty in his mind. His two old neighbours helped each other out the door as they prepared to take a walk at the park.

"Uncle Li, Aunt Li." Pei Xuan took the initiative to greet them.

"Aiya, Little Pei, why are you standing here?" Aunt Li looked at the luggage in his hands, "Did you just come back from a business trip?"

"That's right." Pei Xuan said with a troubled expression after he answered the question, "I've lost my keys there, I cannot get into my house."

"Then go knock on the door, someone is in your house." Aunt Li immediately said, "I saw the lights were turned on at night."

"Is that so?" Pei Xuan immediately walked towards the door in front of them, he knocked on the door repeatedly. "Yun Lin, Yun Lin! Open the door, Dear!"

He shouted louder and louder, the expression on his face got more and more nervous.

The two old people looked at each other, nervousness was spreading among them. Aunt Li asked carefully, "What's wrong? Are the two of you on bad terms?"

"...Something might have happened to Yun Lin." Pei Xuan said in a low voice, "I just went to her school to fetch her, but the people from her school said that she had not shown up in three days."

Aunt Li exclaimed. Uncle Li hugged her tightly and said to Pei Xuan, "I will get my son."

"I cannot wait anymore." Pei Xuan started knocking the door down when he finished speaking.

Bang, bang, bang...

The door suddenly swung open as he took two steps back to prepare to run into the door again.

Li Ping Ping was standing behind the door expressionlessly with a bloodstained knife in hand.

Chapter 68

68: A Match Made in Heaven

"You're back." Li Ping Ping suddenly smiled. "Lunch is ready, come in quickly."

"Who are you?" Pei Xuan looked like he had never met her in his life, he said with vigilance, "Why are you in my house? Where is Yun Lin?"

Li Ping Ping took a look at him before turning around and walking back into the house.

She left Pei Xuan and the rest behind. The two neighbours exchanged looks and asked, "Should we call the police?"

"Let's not do that for now." Pei Xuan said, "Let's not force her into a corner. I'll talk to her first and get a confirmation of Yun Lin's situations."

In the eyes of the bystanders, he was like a fearless and loyal husband. Aunt Li was moved and said, "Then you must be careful. I will get my husband to get help. If anything happens, you should shout for help."

"Thank you." Pei Xuan took a deep breath and entered the door.

Chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop...

The sounds of (a knife) chopping meat grew louder as he got closer to the kitchen.

He reached out and grabbed the golf club in the living room, walked to the kitchen and put on a smile. "What's for lunch today?"

"Couple's Sliced Beef in Chili Sauce and my self-made sweetheart pastry." Li Ping Ping stood in front of the chopping board with her back to Pei Xuan, she continued to chop the meat repeatedly. "It has meat fillings, do you want some?"

Pei Xuan's eyebrows were lifted.

He scanned his surroundings carefully. The house was a lot messier compared to when he left, especially the kitchen. It seemed like a fight had taken place, plates and cups were smashed, the pieces were swept in the corner for now, it was like a mini dumping ground.

Not only that, the floor was a little sticky, it felt disgusting to step on, every step was difficult. Upon closer inspection, there were bloody handprints left on the wall. The bloodstains had already dried, it seemed like it had been there for days.

Connecting these with the meat-filled sweetheart pastry, Pei Xuan lost some of his appetite.

"I ate on the way back." He said with a smile, "It's still early, don't just stand there and cook. Come over here, let's talk."

The chopping sounds stopped, Li Ping Ping slowly turned around and looked at him.

"Alright." She walked over with a knife in hand. "We should have a good talk."

The two of them returned to the living room—one with a knife in hand, the other with a golf club in hand—being on guard mentally with a smile on their faces.

"Why did you pretend not to know me just now?" Li Ping Ping was more straightforward, she was the one to break the silence.

"In the eyes of others, I am a man who is about to get married to Yun Lin." Pei Xuan smiled bitterly. "What would they think if I was familiar with a woman who randomly appeared in my house?"

Li Ping Ping did not say anything, she looked down and stared at the knife in her hand.

"I'm leaving the country soon, we'll leave together when the time comes, we should not complicate matters before that." Pei Xuan told her in a serious manner, "Later on, I will tell the others that you are Yun Lin's colleague, that you are here to take care of Yun Lin who had fallen sick... That's right."

He looked at his surroundings. His gaze stopped at the walls of the corridor, every single photo frame had been taken down, the peepholes on the wall were staring back at him.

"...Where's Yun Lin?" He looked back at Li Ping Ping. "How did you take care of her?"

Li Ping Ping also looked towards the wall at the corridor, "I threw her into the walls."

Pei Xuan was taken aback by her words.

"I would never have imagined that a person could live within the walls." She looked at Pei Xuan as if she was smiling. Upon finishing

her sentence, she did not clarify whether the "person" she referred to was Ning Ning or another person.

The air was heavy until gurgling sounds rang out from the kitchen.

"Lunch is ready." Li Ping Ping said as she got up.

She left Pei Xuan's side and quickly returned with lunch in hand. Rice, Couple's Sliced Beef in Chili Sauce and a piping hot plate of Sweetheart Pastry, the aroma of sesame and meat melded together, but it was unable to stir up Pei Xuan's appetite.

"Eat up." Li Ping Ping placed a piece of sweetheart pastry in front of him. "Why aren't you eating?"

"Let me wash my hands first." Pei Xuan got up and left. When he left, he forgot to bring his golf club along with him.

Li Ping Ping stared at the golf club for a moment. She waited at the original spot quietly. She could only hear (the sound of) water flowing in the washroom, but Pei Xuan did not return, thus she put down her chopsticks and quietly walked over.

She was being careful, but she was not careful enough. A pole swung down from the side and hit her on the head the moment she entered the washroom.

Li Ping Ping shouted as she wobbled on the spot, but Pei Xuan did not give her time to recover. He hit her with a steel pole usually used to hang wet clothes to dry, he also specifically aimed for her head. He only let go of the pole after Li Ping Ping was sprawled on the floor motionless, groaning weakly. He washed his hands and dried them along with his face with a towel, then combed his hair. His reflection in the mirror slowly turned from vicious to prim and proper.

Then, he turned around and walked to the piano room.

There was still a layer of dust on the piano. Pei Xuan did not know how to play the piano, neither did Ning Ning, so this room had been untouched. It was more like a storeroom as it held his documents amongst other things, usually neither of them would come into the room.

The photo frame on the wall had been taken down as well. Pei Xuan walked over to the wall and took out a key, he inserted the key into the peephole.

The peephole was hidden behind the photo frame, the keyhole was hidden within the peephole.

The door that was disguised as a wall opened.

Who knew that there was another world on the other side of the wall.

This world was like a reflection of the outside world. The corridor reflected the corridor, the room reflected the room, it seemed like someone copied the villa on the outside and pasted a copy inside the walls.

The difference was that the world outside was bright and beautiful, whereas the world on the inside was dark and desolate.

"It's so dark, why don't you turn on the lights?" Pei Xuan felt around the wall beside him. As he finished speaking, he switched on the lights.

The lights were turned on, the woman in the corner of the walls flinched.

She was so shrivelled up and skinny that she looked like a dried corpse in a floral dress that was just dug up. The originally pretty curls in her hair were now withered and yellow, her hair was draped on the floor.

Beside her was a plate and a bowl, both of which had been licked clean by her.

"It's just you?" He asked, "Is there anyone else?"

The woman was slow to react, it took a while before she managed to softly make a noise. She did not answer his questions. Instead, she grabbed the bowl beside her while shivering and reached out towards him with it. She looked very cold, hungry and pitiful.

Pei Xuan looked at her quietly for a while before suddenly turning around and running, rushing towards the door.

But he was a step too late.

Ning Ning had led a group of people to the entrance of the walls amidst the sounds of chaotic footsteps. She stopped in her tracks, Pei Xuan stopped in his tracks as well. The two of them looked at each other, Pei Xuan reacted in a flash.

"Little Lin!" He suddenly rushed over and hugged Ning Ning tightly. He smiled as if he met a disaster survivor, repeatedly saying, "You're alright, you're alright..."

How could Ning Ning let him slip away so easily? She looked behind him, "...Yan Qing?"

"Yan Qing?" A cry of surprise rang out from beside them.

These were all their neighbours, the incident with Yan Qing was such a huge deal, everyone knew who she was.

A few bold people walked over and parted the hair of the woman, revealing her face, then shouted in surprise, "It really is Yan Qing, she is not dead!"

Everyone's attention was on Yan Qing, Ning Ning was the only one who was staring at Pei Xuan. She wanted to see if he had anything to say about it. This lying scoundrel actually sighed calmly and turned around to face Ning Ning. "I'm sorry, I didn't want you to see this."

"...What exactly did you do?" Ning Ning asked coldly, "Why is she alive? Why is she here?"

Pei Xuan looked at Ning Ning sincerely, "She begged me to do this."

Ning Ning was taken aback.

"Isn't that right, Yan Qing?" Pei Xuan turned and looked at Yan Qing with a look of pity and disgust. "You said you cannot continue living, you begged me to hide you, to not let anyone from the outside to find you, to not let anyone from the outside to see you, you didn't want to be scolded or spurned."

The originally muddleheaded puppet-like Yan Qing suddenly started shivering upon hearing what Pei Xuan said.

"Your parents also begged me, I agreed in a moment of weakness, I even helped you identify the corpse of a vagrant woman as you." Pei Xuan had more disgust than pity in his eyes. "But these things would always have a limit, right? You weep and sob all day, cursing at everything. Being together with you has been really tough, you started cursing me when I mentioned a divorce..."

"I... didn't." Yan Qing said weakly, "I really didn't..."

"You did." Pei Xuan said with determination. Compared to Yan Qing's frailty, his words were more concise and powerful, his fatigued demeanor was more effective, he said, "You tortured yourself into such a state. You were clearly the one who cheated, you don't want to admit to your mistake, neither were you willing to die. You did not want to go through with a divorce nor did you want to leave me, what exactly do you want? I'm truly...very tired. Truly so very tired..."

Upon finishing his sentence, he took off his glasses and covered his face with his hands.

For a usually smartly-dressed elite to suddenly display weakness in front of others would make him seem even weaker than a weak person.

The people started to empathise for him as if they were bewitched.

"Why is she like this?"

"Sigh, he must have committed a grave sin in his past life to have married such a woman."

"They should have gotten divorced long ago, let her parents bring her back."

"Let me inform her family."

Someone really went ahead and informed her parents, Ning Ning saw Pei Xuan's lips trembling but he did not step up to stop them.

"That's right, we should also call the police." Aunt Li hated injustice, she slapped her husband's thigh and said, "There is another person lying in the washroom, is that a burglar? Forget it, the police will question her."

Pei Xuan's lips trembled again, that was it, he could not say anything to stop them anymore.

He took a glance at Ning Ning beside him, suddenly put his arm around her waist and told the bystanders, "Little Lin looks a little uncomfortable, let me help her get some rest."

"Go, go, we will handle things here." The earnest bystanders urged.

Pei Xuan forcibly helped Ning Ning into the bedroom and closed the door, he stared at her without blinking.

"...You are smarter than I imagined. You are more evil than I imagined." He suddenly started smiling, exposing his true nature, removing his facade. The smile was cunning and gorgeous, it looked like the colourful scales of a venomous snake which were reflecting the sunlight. "The two of us are really a match made in heaven."

Chapter 69

69: Test

"Who's a match made in heaven with you?" Ning Ning pulled his tie, she looked like she wanted to tie a knot and strangle him to death. "You wanted to kill me!"

"Why would I?" Pei Xuan said with shock, trying to mislead her. He looked away after being stared coldly by Ning Ning. "Alright, Li Ping Ping is really an idiot."

"She is indeed an idiot." Ning Ning said coldly, "You would never have admitted that she was helping you to kill me! You would have said that you've lost your key, that she killed me after she picked it up, that you have no knowledge of this happening. You were even on a business trip, you have the perfect alibi!"

"Such an idiot like her would never have guessed that there was someone behind the walls." Pei Xuan said, "Did you tell her? Then you made her tell me that she had already thrown you behind the walls? Ha, if that's the case I would just have to be straightforward about it."

The two of them looked at each other and smiled with the same kind of cunning and vigilance.

"Yun Lin." Pei Xuan suddenly stopped smiling, he looked at Ning Ning seriously, "You have to help me."

This sentence was a shock to Ning Ning, she ridiculed, "Why should I help you?"

She could not think of a reason to help him no matter from Ning Ning's point of view or Yun Lin's point of view.

There was no need to explain about Ning Ning's point of view, but as Yun Lin, no matter how deep her love for him was, it would fade in the face of mortal danger.

"Because we are accomplices," Pei Xuan said, "you won't get away scot-free if anything were to happen to me."

"What did I do? All I did was spread some rumours." Ning Ning laughed. "The same cannot be said for you. No matter how you're going to try to cover it up, people would eventually find out the truth. You imprisoned your wife, lied to the public about her death then

married another woman."

"Didn't the whole incident start from your unfounded rumours and sabotage?" Pei Xuan laughed as well. "Li Ping Ping would definitely be willing to testify that you were the one who told her to paste the photos around the school. If I were to tell people that I was also bewitched by you, whom do you think everyone would choose to believe in?"

Ning Ning looked at him silently.

"One's glory is everyone's glory, one's harm is everyone's harm." Pei Xuan grabbed her hand, gently kissing its back like usual. "The two of us are like ants in a line. You have to help me, I will also help you."

Ning Ning did not want to help him at all, she would rather go to jail.

But would he be brought to justice if she did not help him?

He had found his scapegoats long ago. By the looks of it, the scapegoats were Ning Ning and Li Ping Ping, who knew if there were others? He was too cunning. A sly person (like him) would have more than one plan to fall back on, he would not put all his eggs in one basket.

She would rather trip him from his side than watch him get away.

"All right." Ning Ning answered.

"I knew you would agree." Pei Xuan acted as if he breathed a sigh of relief. He opened his arms and attempted to give her a hug, but Ning Ning slapped him mercilessly.

"I am only helping you this time." Ning Ning said coldly, "You have to give me an explanation after we resolve the current situation."

"I was just muddled for a moment." Pei Xuan touched his blushing cheeks, he looked at her with a smile. "If I had known that you are so sinister and ruthless, I would not have let Li Ping Ping touch you. I would have married you long ago."

Ning Ning, "..."

...Is he for real? Is this guy a psycho?

"It's true." Pei Xuan seemed to have read her mind, he put his arm on her shoulder and said, "I don't like women who are too into me. A woman like Li Ping Ping is everywhere. Easy to control, but they also lose control easily, so I have to change them frequently..."

He looked at Ning Ning with admiration as he said so. "That's why I like someone who is smart and ruthless, that kind of person suits my taste. Like you for example, you are quite charming in my eyes..."

Ning Ning could not help but give him a slap.

He actually started smiling, making shivers run down Ning Ning's spine.

"Alright, it's time for us to make an appearance, don't keep the audience waiting." He hugged Ning Ning's shoulders intimately like an actor preparing to step on stage, he walked through the door and presented himself on stage.

The people outside were in the midst of discussion. Initially, most of them stood on Pei Xuan's side because of his performance, but once Pei Xuan left, people calmed down and started to have a divergent point of view. After all, no matter what Pei Xuan said, the person who had gone through the torture was Yan Qing.

There were a few older women giving Yan Qing food and water, she ate and cried while saying, "At the beginning, he said he will take good care of me while he hides me no matter what others say. But he locked me up...I could not get out, I could only watch him whisper sweet nothings to other women through the peepholes..."

"Have the police arrived?" Pei Xuan suddenly interrupted Yan Qing.

"They are almost here." Someone answered him.

Pei Xuan took a look at Yan Qing. Although he did not do anything, one look was enough to make Yan Qing shiver. She hid in the embrace of an older woman, not daring to come out.

"I know that everyone has their doubts, you don't know whether to believe in Yan Qing or to believe in me. How about this?" Pei Xuan turned around and took a look at Ning Ning, "Let Little Lin monitor me while I bring Yan Qing's parents over. This incident is something that two of them know of. No matter the conclusion, Yan Qing has to go back with them."

Even without rehearsing, Ning Ning had already put on a very fitting expression, her tone was ice cold, "The two of you have not even gotten divorced, where is she going back to?"

Pei Xuan was taken aback, he pulled her hand and said in a low voice, "Listen to me..."

Ning Ning did not answer while her expression remained cold. She looked like she was completely heartbroken by this incident. Adding

the two slap marks on Pei Xuan's face on top of that, no one would think that Ning Ning would help him out, everyone thought that the two of them had become enemies because of this.

Who better to monitor someone other than the enemy of the person?

"That works. Quickly go and come back." Aunt Li said, "I will help you look after things here."

"Thank you, Aunt Li." Pei Xuan answered while looking a little dispirited.

But his expression changed the moment he walked out the door and got in the car. He smiled at Ning Ning beside him. "Sit tight, we are running away."

Ning Ning was stunned by what he said just as she put on the seatbelt. "Running away?"

"Why do you think Li Ping Ping agreed to help me?" Pei Xuan took out two train tickets from his pocket and waved them at her.

Ning Ning's expression turned grave as she looked at the two tickets. "When are those tickets for?"

"Today." Pei Xuan answered as he stepped on the accelerator.

...Today...

This fellow had prepared for the worst case scenario as expected. He came back today to look at the situation—if Li Ping Ping had successfully killed Ning Ning, he would take advantage of the situation and pretend not to know her, then he would continue to live together with Yan Qing who was in the walls.

The problem was that things had developed out of his expectations. Not only did Li Ping Ping fail, but the truth about Yan Qing was also exposed to people, thus this fellow went all in and was preparing to run for it.

What to do?

"We're leaving just like that?" Ning Ning asked.

"If we don't go now, we would not be able to go later." Pei Xuan controlled the steering wheel with one hand as he took out a pack of cigarettes with another.

"...I didn't even bring a pair of pants." Ning Ning did not want to leave at all—or to be more specific, she did not intend to let him

leave. She was trying her best to hinder him right now. "What did you bring? Did you bring money? Going out of town will burn through a lot of money..."

"It'll be alright." Pei Xuan glossed over the topic. He put a stick of cigarette in his mouth. "There will be a huge sum of money transferred into my account soon, I will just forget about the things I leave behind here."

To be able to drop everything on a dime, it would seem that Pei Xuan did not come back for the villa or anything in the villa.

Then why did he come back?

"What kind of money? Would it be enough for the expenses in this period of time?" Ning Ning slowly turned around and looked at him. "You spent quite a lot just on the renovation of this villa, right?"

Instead of saying that he renovated the villa, she might as well have said he spent a lot of money to renovate a prison for the sake of torturing Yan Qing...but he didn't seem like he held a grudge against Yan Qing. He was not someone who committed crime for pleasure, what was his motive for doing so?

"It was a necessary expense, so it was worth it." Pei Xuan spoke about what he did as calmly as he did his normal job. "That's right. The box by your feet, open it up, see if the lighter is in it."

Ning Ning took a look at him before she bent down and opened the luggage by her feet.

She quickly scanned the content once she opened it up, her vision was almost immediately fixed on a letter.

The addressee was Yan Qing. This letter had once been in Ning Ning's hands, but it was snatched out by Pei Xuan. She pretended to look for a lighter while she peeked inside the envelope. Her heart could not help but beat loudly when she saw what was inside.

"Did you find it?" Pei Xuan urged from the side.

"I'm looking." Ning Ning answered frantically as she was panicking.

Although she had already guessed it, she did not have any proof till now.

Pei Xuan was really collecting movie tickets.

He really had the ability to collect movie tickets...

"Found it." Ning Ning found a bronze lighter in the box, she lit it up

with a click.

An answer appeared in her heart as the flame flickered up.

She turned her head and put the flame in front of Pei Xuan, he turned his face and put the cigarette in his mouth to the flame.

"The reason you tortured Yan Qing was not because you held a grudge against her, it was also not because you like to watch her suffer." Ning Ning said slowly as she held up the lighter. "You were using her to get something, right?"

What else could it be?

Tickets!

Despair, ire, the desire to change their fate—only this kind of person could see Life Theater.

Life Theater would also only open its doors to this type of people, it would even use different incidents to deliver the tickets to them. For example—sending a letter, attaching the ticket to the tag within a wedding gown, coming as a free bonus with an old newspaper... Pei Xuan was using Yan Qing to acquire tickets!

Pei Xuan breathed out as he turned around, he blew a puff of white smoke on Ning Ning's face.

Ning Ning was caught off guard by the smoke. Her head immediately felt heavy, it fell on his shoulders.

"You are so smart." Pei Xuan held the cigarette with two fingers. He smiled at Ning Ning who was on his shoulder. "I really cannot bear to be without you."

The car stopped in an alley. There was no one nearby. Pei Xuan put Ning Ning in the driver's seat, she was lying limp on the steering wheel, her foot was on the accelerator. As for him, he opened the door and left the car.

"Towards someone like me," Pei Xuan reached out and touched Ning Ning's face, "you should be more careful."

Ning Ning struggled to keep her eyes open to look at him. She looked on as the frivolous and merciless lips got closer to her before finally landing on her lips.

"...What a pity." Their lips parted, Pei Xuan slowly got up. A true expression of loneliness showed on his face. "You almost passed my test."

Ning Ning did not know what would happen if she had passed the test.

But she was about to find out what happened if she didn't...

A few minutes later, a small car was driven out of the alley. The driver was slumped over the steering wheel as if they were drunk. The car went forward without changing direction, straight onto a big truck...

Flames burst into the sky, Pei Xuan was watching from afar. He looked down and picked up the suitcase by his feet before turning around to leave...

Chapter 70

70: Person by the Pillow

Flames burst into the sky. Ning Ning opened her eyes from the audience seat.

"Welcome back." Shi Zhong Tang's voice rang out beside her ear. He was sitting on the seat beside her, they were shoulder to shoulder with their heads leaning on the other as intimately as lovers. He whispered to her, "Hush, it's about to start."

Ning Ning swallowed her words and watched the screen along with him.

The movie began.

A bridal bouquet flew up in the air and descended on a group of people, pairs upon pairs of hands were reaching out towards it. In the end, a chubby hand caught it.

"Congratulations, Yun Lin." Yan Qing walked towards her while holding up her bridal gown, she smiled innocently. "The next person to get married would definitely be you."

"Thank you." Yun Lin smiled at Yan Qing while embracing the bouquet, her smile held a very deep meaning.

"Introduce her to your friends or colleagues." Yan Qing turned around and looked at the groom beside her. "Yun Lin here is a very nice person."

Ning Ning's breath became unstable once the man dressed in a black suit appeared on screen.

"Sure, I will ask around." Pei Xuan smiled elegantly. He took the opportunity to glance behind him and smiled at Yun Lin as he whisked Yan Qing away.

This happened right under the nose of Yan Qing, but she trusted her husband too much, she trusted her best friend too much, that was why she did not think that anything was off.

"What is this?"

The wedding had ended, the couple returned to their new house. Once they entered the door, Yan Qing saw that the house was filled

with photo frames, every photo frame had a photo of herself. At a glance, it looked like she was being stared at by countless versions of herself.

"It's a wedding gift to you." Pei Xuan hugged her from behind, saying gently, "Do you like it?"

Honestly speaking, it wouldn't matter if it was one or two photos, but filling the house with her photos made Yan Qing feel a little uncomfortable. But she could only play along for now, she forced out a smile. "I do."

"I knew you would like it." Pei Xuan smiled. His look held a deeper meaning as he looked at the new house. "From today onwards, this villa would be filled with you."

Yan Qing did not know what he really meant by that statement at the time.

Until a series of events happened later.

A random man forced a kiss on her and she was photographed right at that moment. The photographs were then plastered everywhere across the school. The principal talked to her, her colleagues gossiped about her, the students looked at her in a different way, her parents cried, her best friend distanced herself...

Yan Qing felt like she was being abandoned by the world, luckily there was one person who had not abandoned her.

"The world and the people outside would only hurt you." Pei Xuan caressed her cheek and looked at her pitifully. "You may as well stay here."

Yan Qing was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"You don't have to explain to those people anymore, they won't believe you no matter what you say anyway." Pei Xuan said, "Quit your job, stay in the house and don't go out, don't meet anyone outside either. Everyone would forget about it after a month or so."

Yan Qing was slightly perturbed. She considered it for a moment before shaking her head with a sense of loss. "What about my father and mother? Even if everyone couldn't find me, they could still find my parents. If they couldn't scold me, they would scold them. *Boohoo...*"

She started crying out of sadness the moment she thought of her parents' hair turning white.¹

"Hush, now." Pei Xuan hugged her to console her as he beguiled her with these words in her ear, "Leave it to me, I have a method that will be the best of both worlds."

Yan Qing—who was hurt and puzzled—indulged in his false care and nodded gently.

Afterwards, Pei Xuan went to look for her parents. He made use of their love for their daughter—of Yan Qing's wish to escape from reality—to easily make them agree to his plan. The body of a female vagrant picked up from the streets, a fake funeral, it was there that Ning Ning saw herself and Li Ping Ping.

"This is?" Pei Xuan turned his head and looked at Ning Ning as he pretended not to know her.

Li Ping Ping introduced her reluctantly, "This is mine and Yan Qing's colleague, Yun Lin."

"Nice to meet you." The man reached his hand out to Ning Ning. "Thank you for coming to Yan Qing's funeral. I am her husband, Pei Xuan."

Ning Ning also put on a look of someone who did not know him, reaching out her hand towards him.

They held each other's hands, the two accomplices were officially entwined together.

Afterwards, they would date, get married, and consummate the marriage.

"No!!!"

Yan Qing let out a painful wail as she watched everything from behind the walls.

"I treated you as my best friend, I treated you as my lover." She shed tears from behind the peephole, her fingernails were digging into the wall. "Yun Lin, Pei Xuan, why must you hurt me like this?"

Yan Qing had never hurt anyone before, she had also never made any enemies before. She didn't understand how a person could be so vicious, didn't understand why her friend and her husband could stab her in the back.

A stab in the back by an enemy would not make a person despair, a stab in the back by someone you know would be the thing that hurt the most.

"It's so hopeless, it's so painful, it's so regrettable..." Yan Qing knelt

on the floor, her tears dripped on the floor, "Oh God, oh God, please save me, rescue me from this place...or...or..."

Her voice was raspy from her sobs, she was only able to form a sentence after a while.

"Or let me redo this again..." She shrieked sadly, "Redo this again!! I will never believe in Yun Lin again, I will never believe in Pei Xuan again, I will never believe in anyone again!!"

As the sad shrill rang out, a knock on the door was heard. Ning Ning who was reading the newspaper in the living room got up to open the door.

The next door neighbour was standing at her door, she was an old woman who had a mix of white and grey hair. She held a letter in her hands, telling Ning Ning with slight disbelief, "There's a letter here for Yan Qing."

No one but the people in Life Theater heard Yan Qing's voice.

They started sending out tickets to her.

The first ticket was hidden in the letter, the second one was hidden in Ning Ning's newly bought bridal gown, the third one was slipped inside an old newspaper. Besides the second ticket, the other two were intercepted by Pei Xuan.

"...He is intercepting tickets right?" Ning Ning finally could not bear it and turned around to ask Shi Zhong Tang, "Does Life Theater allow him to do that?"

"Of course Life Theater would not allow it, but he is the former doorman, he even managed to successfully defect." Shi Zhong Tang stared at the Pei Xuan on the screen while coldly saying, "Not only did he escape from the control of Life Theater, he even kept his memory of the Theater...Ning Ning."

He turned around and looked at Ning Ning, he said earnestly and sincerely, "You will definitely see him frequently in movies from now on. I even suspect that he is still alive right now, somewhere beside you, as someone you may or may not know. You have to be vigilant, don't let him figure out who you are."

Ning Ning's expression turned solemn. She seemed to have understood why Boss Qu and Shi Zhong Tang insisted that this movie was dangerous.

The movie was not what was dangerous, it was the person who escaped the theater's control in the movie.

"...Is there a need to be this nervous?" Ning Ning attempted to lighten the mood. Even though she recognised that Pei Xuan was a dangerous person, she did not think that he would pose a threat to her. "It's not a big deal even if he figured out who I am. He was just a ticket seller, at worst he would grab hold of me to ask if I want to buy any tickets."

Shi Zhong Tang shook his head gently.

"He murdered Yun Lin." He said, "You are a witness. Not only do you know the whole process of the murder, you even know his biggest secret...you know how to create movie tickets."

The look on Ning Ning's face turned for the worse.

She had not known how Life Theater tickets came about.

But in the movie <<Person by the Pillow>>, Pei Xuan practically showed her, step by step, how to create movie tickets with a very scary method.

"...By torturing a person, letting the person go crazy, to despair, to be unreconciled enough to develop the desire to want to change their fate—that's when Life Theater would open its doors and send tickets to the person according to its rules." Ning Ning broke out in a cold sweat as she finished her sentence. She looked at Shi Zhong Tang in a shock. "Is there no limit to this?"

If there were no limits...

Then if not for her meddling, Yan Qing might have been imprisoned by Pei Xuan for her whole life, becoming an endless source of tickets.

"Of course there is a limit." Shi Zhong Tang said impatiently, "The theater would only send a maximum of three tickets per person. Do you understand what that means?"

Ning Ning fell silent for a moment before she bitterly said, "It means that Pei Xuan would have to repeatedly change his targets. He would abandon a victim once he has obtained three tickets, then move on to the next."

"That's right, he will need to change targets repeatedly." Shi Zhong Tang looked to the front as he finished speaking.

Ning Ning shot a strange look at him, then she looked at where he was looking.

She thought she was seeing things.

But she rubbed her eyes and took another look. The wooden chair with carved patterns in the front row was empty—the other customer...disappeared?

"Where did...Li Ping Ping go?" Ning Ning asked, she had a very bad premonition in her mind.

"She was also a witness." Shi Zhong Tang hugged Ning Ning's shoulders. "Moreover, she had the guts to transmigrate as herself. Ning Ning, you have to learn from this."

Ning Ning felt chills running down her spine, she couldn't help but leaned closer to Shi Zhong Tang for warmth.

Life Theater would definitely bring harm to a person. For a person who was transmigrating into a movie for the first time, it would mainly cause psychological harm. But once the person mastered how to get out of character, they would be able to get out of the cycle. The next stage of harm would be brought about by changing the fate of a main character. On the flip side, as long as a person did not change the fate of a main character, they would not receive any harm.

But now, a more direct and scary type of harm had presented itself to Ning Ning.

A type of harm brought on by the people beside you.

"Ning Ning, don't transmigrate as yourself readily." Shi Zhong Tang told her, "If you ever unluckily transmigrate as yourself, you have to be extra careful. Since the enemy is hiding in the dark, you cannot stand out, you have to hide yourself well. "

"Mhm." This time Ning Ning nodded her head without hesitation.

"If possible, try your best to stay away from Pei Xuan...Ah." Shi Zhong Tang looked at the screen and let out a bitter laugh. "It's done for, looks like there is no avoiding him."

Ning Ning stared at the scene on the screen intently.

Flames burst into the sky, Pei Xuan picked up the suitcase by his feet before he turned around and left.

There was a woman waiting for him at his destination.

"Finally arrived?" She turned around and took off her sunglasses, revealing Ning Yu Ren's beautiful face. "Did you bring the tickets?"

This refers to her parents turning old.

Chapter 71

71: Keeping a Clear Mind

Cash on delivery.

Ning Yu Ren handed over a silver suitcase as Pei Xuan handed over the envelope.

Within the envelope were tickets, within the suitcase was money.

Pei Xuan opened the suitcase and inspected the money, then closed it up with a smile. He reached a hand out to her. "Thank you for your patronage."

Ning Yu Ren shook his hand unwillingly. She wanted to retract her hand the moment her fingers touched his, but he pulled her into his embrace.

"Suddenly paying such a huge amount of money, wouldn't you have tough days to come?" Pei Xuan hugged her, his enchanting voice sounded like a snake from the Garden of Eden, tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. "Actually there is another method you can use, a much easier method to get tickets from me..."

"...There's no need." Ning Yu Ren pushed him away without waiting for him to finish. She took a few steps back as if she was avoiding a snake or a scorpion.

"Alright then." Pei Xuan shrugged. He picked up the two suitcases with both hands and nodded to her. "Contact me if you need me for anything."

He turned around once he finished speaking, his coat fluttering in the air behind him, a train's horn rang out in the distance.

Ning Yu Ren looked down at the envelope in her hands, rubbing it with her thumb, the words 'Yan Qing' were written on the envelope. She looked up all of a sudden and shouted at his back, "How exactly did you get these tickets?"

"That's a trade secret." Pei Xuan turned his face, the brim of his hat cast a shadow, the corner of his lips were curled up in it.

Ning Ning clenched on the envelope in her hand and looked at the camera with a complicated expression.

"Mama..." Ning Ning had stood up from her seat at this time.

The two mother and daughter were looking at each other through the screen for a moment. Ning Ning fell back to the seat when the shot cutaway, she held her head in her hands as she asked in agony, "The person who bought the tickets is Mama, how much do you think Mama knows?"

"She doesn't know anything." Shi Zhong Tang consoled her. "She would not have asked if she did."

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief, then sighed again in sorrow.

"...My mother is a very meticulous person. When she was healthy, she would personally take care of everything in the house, everything would be in order, she took very good care of me." Ning Ning reminisced about her life in the past, repeating parts of her memory over and over again. "I really liked that period of my life. She would prepare water for me to wash my face with, I would help her squeeze toothpaste on her toothbrush, then we would brush our teeth in front of the mirror together..."

She closed her eyes and temporarily placed the warmth of that beautiful memory back into her heart, then opened her eyes to face reality.

"...A meticulous person like her would definitely investigate the name on the letter." Her voice trembled a little. "What happened after she found out? Would she continue to buy tickets from Pei Xuan? If she continued buying them, Pei Xuan would continue.."

Continue his life of crime.

Pushing a person into the depths of life, forcing them to suffer, to despair, to then attract the movie tickets.

"...I have to go." Ning Ning stood up abruptly with an extremely anxious expression on her face. "I have to look for someone, I have to get to the bottom of this."

She moved hurriedly in between the rows of wooden chairs, her footsteps were frantically moving towards the direction of the entrance. Shi Zhong Tang's voice rang out from behind her as she was halfway through.

"Ning Ning." He shouted.

Ning Ning stopped in her tracks and turned back to look at him.

"Look." Shi Zhong Tang remained seated as he pointed to the front.

Ning Ning slowly turned her head and looked at the direction he was pointing at.

A pair of cumbersome feet appeared on the movie screen. They walked up a flight of stairs step by step as if they were cuffed by an invisible chain.

A pair of pale arms pushed the black doors in front of them open, the wind from the rooftop rushed onto the face of a person who had reached the end of the line.

Yan Qing.

Ning Ning sighed as she watched Yan Qing walk step by step to the edge of the rooftop. Ning Ning closed her eyes, she simply could not bear to watch this scene.

"Keep watching." Shi Zhong Tang insisted, "Keep watching, Ning Ning."

"What's there to watch?" Ning Ning said with difficulty.

There was another reason for her wanting to leave as soon as possible, she did not want to watch what happened to Yan Qing.

As a spectator, Ning Ning could not do too much for the main character Yan Qing, because the price of changing Yan Qing's fate would be Ning Ning's life. No matter what she tried, no matter how hard she tried, no matter whom she tried to use to help change Yan Qing's fate, she had failed by the looks of it now.

In the end, Yan Qing would still go back on track to her original fate.

She stood on the rooftop and looked down at the crowd of people below.

Yan Qing was very far away and could not hear what they had to say, but as the audience, Ning Ning could hear and see everything. She saw that there was someone who was smiling, it looked like the person was waiting for a show. She could hear a middle-aged woman smugly saying to a person beside her, "Didn't I tell you? She would not make it past three months before committing suicide. Cheating was one thing, but she even held a fake funeral to lie to everyone, she even caused me and my two daughters to be at odds with each other. They said that my words were too much and it made her take her life. Hey, how was it too much? Doesn't a person who lies to her husband deserve to die?"

Fallacious reasoning and self-proclaimed justice, the problem was

that there was a market for what she was saying. There were actually quite a number of people agreeing with her. Once the number of people supporting the opinion increased, the number of people who disagreed with it would decrease. Or it would be more accurate to say that they would choose to remain silent to protect themselves. Their silence would then fan the flames on the other side. The cycle would repeat itself. The voice of one side would get louder, the other side would get softer—this was a silent spiral.

This type of spiral was very difficult to break free from. It would require an even stronger opinion along with an even stronger instigator, or an even stronger crowd. But what did Yan Qing have? She had nothing...

As she slowly stepped out with her right foot, Ning Ning closed her eyes.

"The world kisses me with pain, but I repay it with a song."

The singing voice of an adolescent boy rang out, it was like finding an oasis while drifting in the desert.

Ning Ning opened her eyes abruptly.

"When it hurts, don't close your eyes."

Wen Yu's face appeared on screen. It was not just him who was there, there were three or four more classmates behind him. They were a little embarrassed at first. Although they were also singing, their voices were as soft as a mosquito, you could only hear them if you put your ear to their mouths.

"Where did you lot come from? It's already late. Why are the few of you students not at home doing your homework? Do your parents know that you are here?" The middle-aged woman from before shouted at them with an unfriendly expression.

Wen Yu took a look at her. He walked towards her with a bag in hand, then took out something from the bag and shoved it in her hand.

The middle-aged woman looked down, it was a candle.

Just as she was confused on what to do with it, Wen Yu struck a match and helped her light the candle up.

The other students looked at each other, then copied Wen Yu and gave the candles out to everyone.

"Open your eyes." Wen Yu lit up the candle in his hand. He looked

up at Yan Qing as he sang, "In the darkness of the night, thousands of flames light up for you."

"You're crazy." The middle-aged woman tossed the candle to the floor and snuffed the flame out by stepping on it.

There were a few people who followed her example and threw their candles on the floor.

The middle-aged woman raised her head smugly, only to be astounded to find out that there were quite a lot of people who were holding the candles, lighting up the candles for Yan Qing.

"What are you doing?" She could not help but shout, "You adults are also taking part in the monkey business of a few students? Standing up for that bitch up there, have you people slept with her as well?"

A few men frantically threw their candles to the ground to avoid suspicion. Just as the others were wavering, Wen Yu suddenly turned around and looked at the middle-aged woman, he asked her loudly, "Have you never made a mistake in your life, have you never been slandered before?"

The middle-aged woman laughed coldly, "I have never made a mistake like the one she made, cheating..."

Wen Yu, "What you are doing now is murder."

The middle aged woman furrowed her brows, "What are you talking about?"

"The police will come later, I will tell them honestly." Wen Yu looked at her seriously, "Teacher Yan could have survived, but you fanned the flames and forced her to jump off the building."

The middle-aged woman stomped her feet as she heard those words, she said furiously, "You little brat, you are slandering me!"

"How does it feel to be slandered?" Wen Yu asked her.

The middle-aged woman was taken aback by those words.

Wen Yu slowly scanned his surroundings, the people who fanned the flames, the people who remained silent, the few classmates who stood beside him.

"Have you never made a mistake in your life? Have you never been slandered before?" Wen Yu asked them, then looked down and picked up a candle and gave it to a person beside him. That person had an awkward expression on his face, but he reluctantly accepted the

candle. Just as the person was about to say something, Wen Yu addressed everyone present: "I don't expect all of you to help me, but I hope that at the very least, you won't stop us from saving a person. If Teacher Yan is guilty, the court will pass judgment, if Teacher Yan is innocent, all of you will be an accomplice to a murder. It wasn't a murderer, all of you killed her."

Once he was done speaking, Wen Yu did not look at the crowd of people anymore. He held the candle and walked up the building as he sang.

"Teacher Yan." The flame lit up his young and chaste face, he told Yan Qing who was not far from him, "This is the song you taught me."

Yan Qing had her back to him, she did not turn her head.

More and more footsteps rang out from behind him, more and more people had appeared. Some of them held a candle, some didn't, some were there to watch the commotion, some were there to save her.

"I believe you." Wen Yu said to her, "I will gather evidence and make others believe you too. Although there are not many people who believe you now, the number will increase. Teacher Yan, please believe in me and believe in yourself... As long as you are innocent, time will eventually clear your name."

Yan Qing's body trembled a little, then she slowly turned her head around.

Her face had been filled with tears long ago.

Wen Yu ran over hastily. He helped her off the dangerous side of the rooftop. The two of them took a few steps towards the crowd. The middle-aged woman tsk-ed twice, she looked like she was about to say something but Yan Qing suddenly looked up and stared at her.

"I hate you and the others more than I do Pei Xuan and Yun Lin." Yan Qing's gaze moved from the middle-aged woman to the crowd behind her, her eyes were filled with the flames of rage. "The two of them had their reasons to harm me, but what about all of you? Do you know who I am? You don't even know me, you don't have anything against me, there's nothing you could gain from harming me, so why do you want to harm me? Do you feel happy watching me bleed? Do you feel happy watching me die? Answer me!! Answer me!! Arghhhh!!!"

She suddenly howled towards the sky, it was as if the accumulated grievance and rage had been vocalised, erupting from her like lava. It was a long and forlorn shout, which in the end turned into a sobbing

plea, "I did not even cheat, why do I have to die for something I didn't even do? I want to live, to live till...time proves my innocence!"

The screen darkened, the ending theme started playing.

It was no longer the ternary form of the song 'Person by the Pillow', it was a song which contained pain and warmth.

"The world kisses me with pain." Yan Qing's voice was elevated to the sky, as if it was flying with a pair of battle-scarred wings, "But I repay it with a song!"

The credits started rolling.

At the end, the title of the film appeared.

< < Silent No Longer > >

An applause rang out in the empty theater.

Shi Zhong Tang stood up as he applauded, he said with a smile, "That's my brother for you! Well done!"

Then he turned around and gently told Ning Ning, "You did well too."

Ning Ning covered her mouth with her hands, tears were welling up at the corners of her eyes.

There would always be some movies, characters, or plots which would move people if they were to watch it.

"I know you, I also know my brother. The two of you are actually similar, what you want to do is also what he wants to do." Shi Zhong Tang slowly walked towards her and reached his hand out to wipe her cheeks, "So you see, you are not alone in the cinema, right?"

Ning Ning was a little confused, she carelessly nodded at him.

"It's not just him, I'm here too." Shi Zhong Tang reached out and hugged her, he whispered to her, "No matter what happens in the future, don't despair immediately. Open your eyes and look at him, then look at me. You have to know that you don't only have enemies in the world, you have friends too...although I am only your ex-boyfriend."

"No, you're not." Ning Ning said bleakly in his embrace.

"Haha, then I'm your current boyfriend?" Shi Zhong Tang teased.

"..." Ning Ning did not answer.

Shi Zhong Tang stayed silent for a moment before pushing her out of his embrace with a smile. "Alright, alright. Didn't you want to find someone to get to the bottom of this? Quickly go."

Ning Ning looked at him with a complicated expression for a while before acknowledging him softly and turning around to leave.

"...What do you get out of helping her like that?" A masked person asked after Ning Ning left. The other masked persons were also staring at Shi Zhong Tang even though they did not say a word.

"I just like her." Shi Zhong Tang said without hesitation.

"Then you should make her despair more." The masked person shook his head. "That's the only way you can pull her in and make her stay by your side forever."

"...Maybe there will be a day when I will want that." Shi Zhong Tang gazed at the direction Ning Ning left in, he tilted his head and said with a gentle expression, "But for now, I just want to love her from the dark."

No one knew what kind of choice they would make in the future, most people would make a choice in the present due to a regret in the past.

In a coffee shop, Ning Ning and Cui Hong Mei stared at each other, at a loss of what to do. Both were wearing weird expressions on their faces.

"...I thought that you will never take the initiative to call me out until the day I die." Cui Hong Mei drank her coffee to mask her unease.

Ning Ning also did not think that she would ever take the initiative to contact Cui Hong Mei in her life. She coughed twice to mask her awkwardness, then she started, "You told me before that you knew what Mama spent her money on..."

After a pause, Ning Ning stared into Cui Hong Mei's eyes and asked, "Did she spend all her money on tickets?"

Chapter 72

72: Three Questions

"Why did you ask me since you already knew?" Cui Hong Mei laughed coldly.

Ning Ning was dizzy for an instant, she closed her eyes and opened it again. "Whom did she buy the tickets from?"

"How would I know?" Cui Hong Mei placed her coffee cup on the table and added a few sugar cubes, she mixed them with a spoon. "She treated only you as family, not me. She hid everything from me, had her guard up against me..."

Cui Hong Mei stopped stirring her coffee, a desolate expression flashed across her face.

But the desolation only lasted for a few seconds, she quickly reverted to her usual looks, a face of bitter sarcasm. "But I have eyes and ears, I can hear and see things, she cannot hide those things from me."

"What did you hear?" Ning Ning could not help but sit up and look at her. "What did you see?"

"Everyone treated me as the bad guy, and treated her as the good one." Cui Hong Mei said blandly, "There is no one in the world who is purely good or bad. The peerless movie empress, the crown jewel of art, a world's wonder—leading an ill-fated life due to her bloodsucking mother who destroyed it...She was not as innocent as all of you thinks she was."

...What the hell, isn't this what's written on the entertainment news? You said that you don't care about people scolding you on the surface, but the fact is that you've already memorised the exact things people were scolding you about?

Ning Ning ridiculed Cui Hong Mei in her mind and asked, "Why did you say so?"

Her phone suddenly rang before Cui Hong Mei could answer.

It was her manager calling.

"Hello." Ning Ning stood up impatiently, she took the call in the

washroom. "I'm a little busy right now..."

Li Bo Yue interrupted her, "What is more important than work?"

"A little personal matter." Ning Ning said, "I will call you back later, maybe in an hour?"

"We don't even have a minute to lose." Li Bo Yue said, "Opportunities are hard to come by, you have to come back immediately."

A few minutes later, Ning Ning returned from the washroom. Cui Hong Mei tilted her head and sneered at Ning Ning before Ning Ning could say anything. "You are turning more and more like your mother."

Ning Ning was stunned by those words.

"Work, work, work." Cui Hong Mei slowly repeated this word a few times. "The two of you only have work in your lives, nothing else."

Ning Ning was suddenly flushed, she wanted to refute, but she did not know how to.

Because she had indeed needed to go back to work.

"...I have something urgent today." After a period of time, she said awkwardly, "I will invite you again next time."

Ning Ning picked up her bag stiffly and left after she paid for the coffee, but Cui Hong Mei's voice rang out from behind her before she could take a few steps.

"Oh that's not right." Cui Hong Mei laughed at her back. "You two claim it's for your dreams, giving up everything for your dreams, how noble."

Ning Ning stopped in her tracks for a moment, before continuing to leave.

She raised her hand to hail a taxi, boarded it and stated the name of her company.

The taxi drove off. She stared at her reflection in the window and raised a hand to touch her cheek. "Am I becoming more and more like Mama?"

The reflection in the car window was definitely looking more and more like Ning Yu Ren, regardless of looks or demeanour.

Under the polish of Life Theater, under the polish of different movies and roles, the two of them were gradually becoming identical.

"Isn't this my dream?" Ning Ning mumbled, it was as if she was interrogating her reflection in the window. "Wasn't my dream to become someone like Mama?"

The peerless movie empress, the crown jewel of art, a world's wonder...

The cheers, the acknowledgements, and the praises of countless people...

Suddenly a disharmonic voice rose up.

"Work, work, work! The two of you only have work in your lives, nothing else."

Ning Ning was suddenly awakened and shouted, "Stop."

The taxi stopped.

After ten minutes or so, the door to the coffee shop opened.

Cui Hong Mei was eating on the sofa, she seemed to have gone to the coffee shop without eating prior, hungry as a wolf. She ordered a tableful of food once Ning Ning left, it was mostly desserts with high sugar and butter content.

"You're already this old, you should eat less junk food." A stern voice rang out in front of her, "Aren't you afraid of getting diabetes?"

Cui Hong Mei was taken aback by those words. She slowly looked up at the person who was talking, a trace of surprise was in her eyes. "Why did you come back?"

Ning Ning stood expressionlessly in front of Cui Hong Mei, her phone was ringing non-stop.

Cui Hong Mei glanced at her phone then back at her. "Are you not picking that up?"

Ning Ning answered (the call). She did not put it on loudspeaker but Li Bo Yue's shouts erupted from the phone, a fancy tenor rang out in her ear, "Are you coming! You little annoyance! Life rests within exercise, why aren't you starting to run? One, two, three. One, two, three...Why am I not hearing you run??"

"I'm running! I'm running!" Ning Ning started to run on the spot. "Oh no, my phone is running low on battery from your shouts!"

She quickly stopped running after turning off her phone, then sat down opposite of Cui Hong Mei.

"...Hahahahaha!!" Ning Ning did not know what Cui Hong Mei

found funny. Cui Hong Mei laughed so hard that she almost spat her dentures out! She wiped her tears and said, "Seeing that you made me laugh so hard, I will allow you to ask me three questions today. I will answer as long as I know the answer."

Ning Ning thought about it, then asked, "Do you know what the tickets are used for?"

"I don't know." Cui Hong Mei answered. "All I know is that ever since Yu Ren started buying tickets, she had continuously changed. Sometimes the changes were good, sometimes they were bad, but outsiders could only see how much her acting skills improved."

"What was the bad side of it?" Ning Ning asked.

"There was a lot." Cui Hong Mei smiled.

This answer was too vague, Ning Ning probed further, "For example?"

"For example..." Cui Hong Mei thought about it. "In 1997, the time when you went missing, guess what her reaction was?"

Ning Ning was surprised. She answered, "It was of course to look for me."

"No." Cui Hong Mei laughed, "She did not go to look for you. In the month that you were missing, she calmly stayed at home. Ate when she was supposed to eat, slept when she was supposed to sleep, acted when she was supposed to act, it was as if she did not have a daughter."

"That's impossible!" Ning Ning quickly stood up, then sat back down under the stares of the people around them. She said to Cui Hong Mei in a low voice, "You are lying to me!"

"I'm not lying to you. If not for a teenage couple who picked you up, you probably would have frozen to death in the harsh winter. Speaking of which, what were their names?" Cui Hong Mei thought about it. "The name of the boy seems to be Wen...*Sigh*, I'm getting old, I cannot remember clearly."

"...Then?" Ning Ning stared at her with gritted teeth, she was already beginning to suspect that Cui Hong Mei was talking nonsense. Just because Mama could not jump out of the coffin to refute, she had free reign to malign her.

"Then?" Cui Hong Mei seemed to have remembered something relevant and let out a joyous laugh. "A month later, she seemed to have turned into another person. She looked everywhere for you like a

madman. She even lost her temper at me, asking me why I didn't take good care of you. I was incredulous. If she was really nervous about you, shouldn't she have gone to look for you long ago?"

Her actions were indeed weird, Ning Ning could not think of a reasonable explanation at the moment.

On the contrary, it was Cui Hong Mei who thought up a barely passable explanation. "I carefully thought about it afterwards and understood. Your mother probably wanted to abandon the annoyance that was you in the beginning, then regretted it a month later. She started to lose her temper at me after she failed to find you. But you should count your lucky stars that the teenage couple brought you home. Your mother started to really dote on you after that, she wished she could tie you to her belt. Haha, that was the kind of person she was. She would forever try to compensate after she made a mistake."

"My mom was not that kind of person." Ning Ning said stiffly.

"Okay, okay, okay. Your mother was a good person, I am a liar. Don't believe in what I just said, it was all lies." Cui Hong Mei waved her hand casually. "Alright, I have already answered your three questions, is there anything else you want to say to me?"

The two of them fell silent.

Although they were relatives, the relationship between them was weak, they didn't even share any memories in life. If Ning Yu Ren were to be put aside, the two of them would not have a common topic...they didn't even have the same taste in shows! Ning Ning liked to watch idol drama, but Cui Hong Mei preferred modern drama...

"Looks like there is nothing else to say." Cui Hong Mei smiled as she got up, "I'll go have my hair done, you...you should go back to work, earn money diligently so you can take good care of me."

Half an hour later, a taxi stopped at the entrance of Ning Ning's office.

After she alighted from the taxi, she ran all the way to look for Li Bo Yue. She was panting heavily when she found him. "Life rests within exercise. I ran all the way here, what's the matter?"

Li Bo Yue looked at his watch and sighed. "I don't know if we can still make it. Forget it, let's give it a shot."

He pushed Ning Ning from behind and walked out of the office with her.

"Quick, deal with the oil on your nose." Li Bo Yue said as they

walked.

Ning Ning frantically took out her powder box from her bag. She asked as she fiercely powdered her face, "What are we doing now?"

"The company is about to film a biography, the subject is a world famous singer. They are already at the office." Li Bo Yue said, "This person is remarkable. Famous, rich and is passionate about charity. The public has a very good opinion of her...Of course, the most important thing is that the investor is her husband and student, so she wants to personally pick the female lead for this documentary."

"What's her name?" Ning Ning had finished touching her makeup up and placed the powder box into her bag.

Li Bo Yue stood in front of a huge door and knocked on it thrice. The person in the room said, "Come in."

The huge door was opened, a few pairs of eyes were looking up at Ning Ning, one of which was old and gentle.

The pair of eyes belonged to an elegant old lady with white hair. She was sitting on the sofa, smiling at Ning Ning. It was a peaceful and gentle smile that could comfort even the deepest pain.

"Let me introduce you." Li Bo Yue walked up to the old lady to do the introduction. "This is the famous singer from our country—Yan Qing, Madam Yan."

Chapter 73

73: Tripartite

There were two other actresses in the room besides Ning Ning.

Ning Ning was a step too late, Yan Qing had already finished talking about the events of the first half of her life, she was now going to talk about the second half.

"...It was thanks to the few students of mine that I did not commit suicide." She touched her combed white hair. "But the days did not go by easily. Most of my hair turned white then, I would dye it black in secret with shoe polish, but the smell was really bad, it was so smelly that my parents would not get close to me."

She let out a laugh, the people around her laughed along with her.

"Then, with the help of the students and their parents," she said, "I went overseas. I studied music in France...Of course, I studied foreign language at first."

For a small town female teacher, going overseas was like transmigrating to another world. A street full of people were speaking in a language she didn't understand. But this kind of world was a sigh of relief for her, because they would not stare at her with weird looks.

Thus Yan Qing settled down in France. She studied French arduously, she studied music arduously. She worked very hard, because she knew that if she did not achieve anything there, she would have to return to the small town full of rumours and gossip, a small town where even her parents treated her with disdain.

"...I met my current husband, Mr. Wood, when I was studying." Yan Qing smiled like a teenage girl when she mentioned him. "He was not like a typical French man at all. He was not romantic in the slightest nor would he say anything sweet. The first thing he said when he saw me was, 'Could you stop using shoe polish on your hair?'"

After the awkward encounter, there were surprising developments. One day when Mr Wood finished helping her wash her hair. "Stop applying shoe polish on your hair, I think you look quite nice the way you are now." Not long after, Yan Qing actually stopped dyeing her hair. She combed her white hair neatly and wore fashionable little hats. In the beginning, she was worried about her everyday life, until

her teacher gave her a thumbs-up and told her that the look was very fashionable and that it suited her very well.

Yan Qing maintained the style after receiving that encouragement. Throughout her concerts, throughout her charity work, throughout her interviews, her white hair and tiny hat would slowly become a trademark of hers.

"That was my life." Yan Qing said in conclusion, "I hope that one of you could bring my life onto the screen and to reenact it for me and the audience."

Yan Qing did not stay long because she had a speech in the afternoon, the others in the room left not long after Yan Qing did. The actresses started to discuss the role with their managers.

"Three parts." All the managers had the same conclusion, "Yan Qing's life contains three parts."

The three actresses listened quietly.

"The rumours and gossip in the little town, the new lover and life in a foreign country, the accomplishments in her career and charity." Li Bo Yu told her actress, "Ning Ning, which part would you like to act in?"

Ning Ning thought about it. "Can't I act all of them?"

"There is no need." Li Bo Yue said, "This is not the official shoot. Your objective now is to move Yan Qing, to make her feel like you are the best candidate, the candidate that is most suited to portray her."

Ning Ning looked down and thought about it deeply.

"How about it?" Li Bo Yue asked, "Which part are you the most confident in?"

"The first part, the small town with rumours and gossip."

She had personally experienced that part of Yan Qing's life. She had personally heard those rumours and gossip, personally seen Yan Qing getting attacked by them, being at her wits' end, and getting forced step by step to the rooftop.

"Honestly speaking, that is not the best choice." Li Bo Yue folded his arms. "A person would usually subconsciously avoid their tragic past and present their brilliance in front of others instead. Did you not realise? Yan Qing was the most sentimental when she was talking about the second part, she spent the most time talking about the third part. It would seem that she wishes to exhibit her love life and career

(accomplishment) to people more."

He smiled at Ning Ning when he got to this point. "...Not the part about her life in a small town she spent five minutes talking about."

Ning Ning now knew approximately how long she was late for. In these five minutes Yan Qing had narrated her life in the small town.

Li Bo Yue was right, the first part was definitely not the best choice.

She should pick the second or third part for the sake of pleasing Yan Qing.

But Li Bo Yue answered a call at this moment and his brows furrowed as he listened to the call. In the end, he hung up and told Ning Ning, "We don't have a choice."

Ning Ning was surprised.

"Xu Yue will act out the second part, Lin Yin Yin will act out the third part." Li Bo Yue cursed under his breath. "Damn it, they want to use us as a foil to serve as a contrast."

He looked really angry, because not only did they play Ning Ning, they also played him. He was not as docile as Ning Ning, he was a person who would bite back the dog that had bitten him. Thus he immediately made a few phone calls then told Ning Ning coldly, "Come with me tonight and be prepared to stay up for the night."

"What for?" Ning Ning could not help but shudder.

"We are working overtime, Dear." Li Bo Yu answered with a smile.

A few days later, during a speech held in the hall of a certain university.

"...In 1994, I almost lost all my dignity and reputation, I even almost lost my life." Yan Qing told the university students attending her speech, "The truth of this incident was only revealed years later. It cost me a lot of time, effort and money. What did it cost the other party?"

Yan Qing held up three fingers.

"Thirty dollars." Yan Qing said with a smile. "Twenty dollars1 to hire someone to force a kiss on me, five dollars1 to rent a camera, the remaining money was used to develop and spread the photos. She succeeded. She used thirty dollars1 to set off a storm of rumours and gossip which almost destroyed public opinion of me."

"That incident happened in a small town, and now, there are a lot

of similar incidents happening online. Students, can someone tell me, how much does it cost to set off a storm of rumours and gossip now? Or to put it better, how much does it cost to push a post on Weibo onto the trending page?"

A few hands were raised, there was a student who shouted the answer without raising their hand. "Three thousand dollars¹ per post! Paying people or bots to comment and paying VIPs to share the post are additional costs, the prices are fair so no one will be cheated of their money."

"What the hell, there is one of them among us? He even used this opportunity to advertise?"

"Screw you! I only researched them for some knowledge. Who would want to be one of them?"

The hall erupted in laughter, even Yan Qing found it amusing. She sighed after laughing and said, "Three thousand dollars to destroy a person's life. No one does these things in real life, but there is already a price for it on the internet."

The laughter gradually faded, the audience looked at the white-haired woman who was wearing a little black hat on the stage. She slowly said, "The internet is a good thing. If I had it back then, I might have written about my incident and pleaded to the netizens. To ask the netizens to help me find the person who forcibly kissed me, to help me find a witness for the incident, but—"

She suddenly dragged out her words, her voice sank abruptly.

"If I could use the internet, the person who set me up could also use the internet." Yan Qing said in a low voice, "Since the person could create a storm in real life, who knew if they could create the same storm online? When two completely opposite posts were presented to you students, which one would you believe in? Which one would you attack? How could you be sure...that you were not being manipulated? You insist on justice, but is that really justice?"

The speech lasted for around two hours. Two hours later, Yan Qing ended her speech in a round of applause. She sat in the lounge to rest for a while. The door opened and a young man smartly dressed in a suit walked in.

"Wen Yu." Yan Qing opened her eyes and smiled at him. "What brings you here?"

"I came to attend your speech." Wen Yu walked towards her and handed a bouquet of flowers over. "You've worked hard, Teacher Yan."

"I should be the one thanking you." Yan Qing accepted the flowers and smiled as she said, "If not for you and Director Shi back then, I would not have what I have today... Sit, sit, let's look at something together."

Wen Yu sat by her side and watched as she took out her phone and opened WeChat. There were videos sent by three people in it.

"I brought it up to you in the past that I wanted to make a documentary about myself. I went over to take a look at the actresses they proposed. They are all very pretty, much prettier than me when I was young." Yan Qing smiled as she said, "I was originally invited to watch their auditions, but I am too busy. I need to fly off at once after this speech, I simply don't have the time to drop by. So I told the three of them to send me their audition videos. Here, watch them with me, critique them while you're at it."

Wen Yu nodded and shifted his vision onto her phone.

She played the first video. The video was of a young actress who was quite popular. She had really good looks and figure, she was a typical vase-type beauty who would dazzle in front of one's eyes.

She was sitting at a door, applying shoe polish on her hair, then used a comb to even the polish out.

The door was suddenly flung open and a man stepped in, he immediately took a step back while pinching his nose. He spoke in French, "Could you stop using shoe polish on your hair?"

Wen Yu heard Yan Qing laughing softly from the side, it looked like this video reminded her of a beautiful memory.

The second of Yan Qing's three-part life—meeting a new lover in her new life overseas.

The video was very short, it ended after four minutes. Yan Qing smiled and asked Wen Yu when it ended, "What did you think?"

"It was not bad." Wen Yu answered frankly, "Although she is lacking in acting skills, watching her act gave people a good feeling."

Yan Qing nodded as well. She seemed a little moved, but she would not deny the others their opportunities, thus she tapped on the second video and said, "Let's watch this one."

The second video started playing, an older actress appeared in the video. Her looks naturally could not be compared to the previous actress, but her technique was very refined.

She was also very skillful. She was standing on a stage giving a speech, the content of the speech was coincidentally the same as her speech today, about cyber-bullying.

"Students, which one of them would you believe in? Which one of them would you attack? How would you be sure...that you are not being manipulated?" The actress looked around her. There was no one around her, but it felt like she was talking to a crowd. She was only wearing her pajamas, but she was as imposing as a warrior. "The justice you insist on, is it really justice?"

This video was not long either, it ended in five short minutes. After that Wen Yu and Yan Qing looked at each other, Yan Qing could not help but chuckle. "That actress was so good, I was just thinking, who recorded my speech and sent it to me."

That sentence meant that she completely acknowledged the actress.

At least based on likeness, this actress named Lin Yin Yin had already completely captured her essence, the Yan Qing she had portrayed was virtually Yan Qing herself.

Wen Yu could tell that Yan Qing favoured the second actress more than the first one, she liked the other's portrayal of the third part of her ternary life—the success of her career and her charity work. After all, this was supposed to be part biography and part public welfare film. Yan Qing wished that this film would convey ideas to the audience rather than exhibiting her personal life.

Afterwards, Yan Qing rewatched this video two more times. She felt more satisfied as she watched it, she even seemed to have forgotten the existence of the third video.

"Let's watch the third video." Wen Yu said.

It actually did not make a difference to him whether they watched it or not, but his good friend Li Bo Yue called him ten times consecutively and said that Yan Qing had to watch that video no matter what.

That was why Wen Yu helped to put in a word for him.

"Alright." It also didn't matter to Yan Qing if she watched it or not. Since Wen Yu had mentioned it, she conveniently played it. She looked tired from her speech and the two videos from before as she leaned back on the sofa, her eyes narrowed, looking like she could not concentrate.

"I'll get you a glass of water." Wen Yu got up and left, he heard a

clack from behind him after just taking a few steps.

He turned back and saw that Yan Qing's phone had fallen on the floor.

She was sitting on the sofa, her hands were still in the same position they were when she was holding the phone, all of her fingers were trembling slightly, she stared at the phone on the floor without blinking.

It was as if she had seen the worst nightmare of her life.

1These are in Chinese Yuan, 3000 yuan equates to approximately 428usd, 30 yuan equates to approximately 4usd.

Chapter 74

74: Trial of the Witch

The previous two videos were taken at home, they had lighter tones. No matter if it was Xu Yue or Lin Yin Yin, they tried their best to make themselves stand out in the light, so that Yan Qing would have a better look at the vivid expression on their faces and their abundant body language. But the third video was different—it was filmed outdoors.

The location was a school.

The sky was dark, the students had all gone home. A door to the classroom slowly opened, a figure which could not be seen clearly was walking into the room. The figure walked in the darkness and stopped by a wall, then they raised their hands and hung the item they were holding on the wall.

A light from a flashlight lit up her hand and the item she was hanging.

It was a photo frame.

The flashlight shifted onto the photo frame. There seemed to be a photo in it, but before Yan Qing could see what was in the photo, the flashlight had already shifted downwards onto the back of the woman's head.

All of her hair was combed back and was tied high up in a bun. This hairstyle made her look more strict and old-fashioned, it suited her loosely fitted black clothes, she looked like a nun from the middle ages.

"Thanks for your bouquet, Yan Qing." She said with her back to the camera, "The next one to get married was me as expected."

Clack, her phone fell to the floor.

Yan Qing's hands trembled, she stared firmly at her phone on the floor.

"Teacher Yan, what's the matter?" Wen Yu walked over and bent over to pick up the phone from the floor, he tried to return it to her.

Yan Qing unexpectedly jerked back. It was as if the item Wen Yu

was holding was not a phone but a weapon that could harm her, a fire that could burn her.

"You don't have to introduce a prospective partner for me anymore, because I have already found the perfect partner at your wedding." A woman's voice rang out from the phone, it sounded like she was bragging and looking forward to the future. "Mr Pei...I will have a perfect love life with him, then have a perfect wedding—right in front of you."

She laughed softly, raising a hand to touch the photo frame in front of her. It looked like she was touching a real person who was hung on the wall and could not move.

"No..." Yan Qing suddenly covered her eyes, she said in a weak and pitiful tone, "No..."

"I didn't actually want to hurt you, I didn't think that things would turn out like this either. A photo, a rumour, almost everyone believed it, almost everyone joined in on this crusade. Do you think their lives are too boring? Or are they just too easily controlled by other people?" The woman shown on the phone said.

"Why?" Yan Qing suddenly erupted. She put down her right hand and looked at the phone—seeming to have forgotten that what she was watching was but a video.

"...There was no reason, maybe we did it just for fun." The woman shown on the phone laughed. "Your life is too easy. You graduated from a famous school, you have looks that stand out, you even married a perfect man. We wished you well at your wedding, but the truth is that I am jealous and I hate you. I stabbed you in the back once, the rest were done by other people, including the teacher from the dorm room next door and the male teacher who used to like you. There were also people who tried to defend you, but they would stop whenever we put them down..."

"So Yan Qing, whom do you hate the most?" The woman on the phone slowly turned around, "Is it me, Pei Xuan, or the people who forced you on the path of death for fun?"

Yan Qing's chest rose and fell continuously, she looked very agitated. Wen Yu saw what was happening and was about to stop the video, but Yan Qing reached out to stop him.

"Yun Lin." Yan Qing stared at the woman on the phone and said, "Is that you? You're not dead, right? You're back for me..."

The woman on the phone finally turned around, but she looked

down without saying anything. She reached out to the back of her head with a hand and untied the bun. The moment the bun was released and her hair fell, she looked up abruptly, revealing a face full of tears, gritting her teeth like a poor girl being accused of being a witch in the middle ages, caught in a trial by the mob.

A ray of pale white light was shining from above to illuminate her. She turned as white as paper in an instant and shadows were eroded out under her in all directions.

"I did not cheat on my husband!!" Ning Ning shouted at the camera. She dug her chest viciously with her right hand, as if she wanted to dig out her innocent soul for the mob to see. "Every one of you closed your eyes and covered your ears, none of you listened to my explanation, you were not willing to open your eyes to the truth. You are so sure that I am guilty, but who are you to judge me? Will my corpse bring happiness to you? Answer me! Answer me!!"

She let out a long sad wail, a sound from the deepest part of her soul, it made Yan Qing relate to her, causing her to tremble.

"Ah..." Yan Qing reached out to touch the video, it seemed like she wanted to pass through the phone and stroke the scarred woman in it, the scarred woman who was herself.

As her fingers touched the ice-cold screen, a cold voice suddenly rang out from within the screen.

"I hate all of you."

Yan Qing was shocked.

"I hate all of you who don't know anything yet ask me to die. I hate you too, Yun Lin. I treated you as my best friend, but you stabbed me in the back." Ning Ning slowly took out a fruit knife from her pocket. "But the person I hate the most is you. You were the ringleader, you were the one who has ruined my past..."

She suddenly looked up to the screen with hate-filled eyes, stabbing towards the screen with both hands holding the knife while shouting, "Pei Xuan!"

The video ended here.

Yan Qing sat back on the sofa, holding up her head with her right hand as she fell silent for a moment.

"...Because of that experience in the past." She started talking slowly after a period of time, as if she was talking to herself, "I once had a very serious mental problem. I avoided seeing a psychiatrist because

of our traditional mindset. It was not until my husband found out that I was taking sleeping pills behind his back that he sent me to a psychiatrist. It was under the suggestion of the psychiatrist that I started to commit myself to charitable work, extending a helping hand to pitiful people who are in a situation similar to what I experienced once..."

Wen Yu looked at her quietly.

"...But my nightmare has not ended." Yan Qing put her hand down and slowly turned to look at him. She laughed bitterly. "I can forgive a lot of people, I can even forgive Yun Lin, but there is only one person I cannot forgive—Pei Xuan! Only that person. I have to find him, I have to exact my revenge on him. Only then can I end my nightmare."

Had the movie really ended?

Maybe Yan Qing was still in a movie, depicting the fourth part of her life—a nightmare which could not be driven off.

Going through a rollercoaster of emotions made Yan Qing feel exhausted. Wen Yu fed her a cup of warm water, then had someone bring him a thin blanket to allow her to take a little nap in the lounge. He walked out of the lounge, looking down as he took out his phone. In the phone was the video Yan Qing had just sent him.

The audition video of Ning Ning.

All Yan Qing saw was Ning Ning's spectacular performance of two different characters, but Wen Yu had noticed some details.

The two previous actresses weren't bad, why was it that this video was able to move Yan Qing? Because of the details. Wen Yu narrowed his eyes as he played the video again, he cross-referenced it with his memory. As expected.

He had a very good memory.

Even if it was a person he saw ten years ago, a scenery he saw ten years ago, he could replicate it in a drawing today.

Ning Ning might not have noticed it herself. When she was acting—especially when she was acting as Yun Lin—her expressions, her demeanor, the way she dressed, her manner of speaking as well as her every little action were too true to life. It was as if they were really looking at Yun Lin!

Yun Lin was dead. She had died without a trace, there were no videos of her left. Although Yan Qing had talked about Yun Lin in her

memoir, she was already getting on in her age when she wrote it, she could only remember the broad outline of this enemy from the past. If one were to act according to the memoir, they would only be able to act out the broad outline of her.

But now, Ning Ning had reproduced a complete Yun Lin in front of Yan Qing.

That was why Yan Qing lost herself.

"How did you know..." Wen Yu stared at Ning Ning on the screen and mumbled.

"How did you know?"

Li Bo Yue looked at Ning Ning in the office and asked her, "How did you know that Yan Qing's adversary was named Yun Lin?"

"...I read her memoir and watched videos of her speeches." Ning Ning answered, "She mentioned this person in these."

Li Bo Yue nodded, he seemed to have accepted this explanation. His phone was by his hand, he would occasionally shoot glances at it, as if he was waiting for someone to call him. He randomly asked Ning Ning the question as he was bored from waiting for the call.

The phone finally rang.

"Hello." Li Bo Yue answered the phone, the person on the other end said something that made him slowly start to smile, it was the smile obsessed with ambition that Ning Ning was most familiar with.

He crossed his arms and smiled at Ning Ning after he put the phone down. "Good news."

Ning Ning's heart skipped a beat. "I passed?"

"Yes, you passed the first test." Li Bo Yue answered honestly.

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief and asked, "Who am I acting as? Yan Qing or Yun Lin?"

Li Bo Yue was a person who was unwilling to take the short end of the stick. When someone else wanted to use him to fill the quota up, he would refuse to take it lying down. He immediately found a location and some lighting to let Ning Ning portray two characters, the objective was clear—if she could not land the female lead, she would at least land the role of the supporting female character! They could not stay inconsequential, they must rock the boat!

Ning Ning was a lot calmer compared to him. She had not much

use for money after her mother passed away. She did not act for the sake of money, it was all for the sake of improving her acting skills, so it didn't matter if she landed the leading role or supporting role., But if she had a choice, she would prefer to act as Yan Qing, because she had acted as Yun Lin before, so it would not be a challenge.

"Yan Qing? Yun Lin?" Li Bo Yue raised his eyebrows. "They can go to hell."

Ning Ning was stunned. "...Weren't you waiting for the results of the audition?"

"I was waiting for the results of the audition." Li Bo Yue laughed. "But I didn't send the video of you acting as two roles to just them, so of course I'm waiting for an answer not only from them."

He pulled open the drawer to take out a book and tossed it in front of Ning Ning once he finished speaking.

Ning Ning looked down, it was actually another memoir, titled < < Trial of the Witch > > .

"It's another famous woman, another biographical film." Li Bo Yue smiled at Ning Ning. "She had watched your audition video and had decided to give you a chance at the role of the female lead, but she has one request—you have to act as two roles in this film!"

Chapter 75

75: Unequaled Beauty

"Is that you?" Smoke slowly billowed out of a pair of red lips, a woman in a *cheongsam* who was holding an opium pipe in her right hand slowly walked towards Ning Ning. She looked like a socialite who walked out of an old republic photo. She reached out and lifted Ning Ning's chin to have a better look at her. "You don't look as pretty as you are on TV."

"It proves that she is photogenic." Li Bo Yue answered for Ning Ning, "Her looks are well suited for the big screen."

The woman snorted softly, it was not clear whether she was mocking Ning Ning or had accepted the explanation.

"Sit." The woman in the *cheongsam* turned around, walked to the sofa and sat down.

"You should know who I am right?"

"I do." Ning Ning looked at the other party.

The other party was a well-known woman like Yan Qing.

What was different was that while Yan Qing was famous, this woman was infamous.

"Tell me." The woman in the *cheongsam* lifted her chin slightly, looking at Ning Ning in a slightly haughty manner. "What kind of person am I in your eyes?"

Ning Ning certainly could curry favour with her by complimenting her, but did the famous woman in front of her need Ning Ning to do so? Maybe the thing she had experienced the most in life was having people compliment her in her face while vilifying her behind her back.

"There are two types of women in the world, one who makes a living out of talent and one who makes a living with her looks." Thus, Ning Ning answered honestly, "You are the latter."

Li Bo Yue frantically shot a look at Ning Ning, he did not expect the woman to laugh upon hearing what Ning Ning said.

"That was quite well put." The woman gently touched her face and sighed deeply. "Most people don't see things as clearly as you do, they

call me a scheming bitch, but with a face like mine, would I even need to scheme?"

She laughed at Ning Ning as she finished her sentence.

Ning Ning could not help but be smitten by her smile even though she was a woman.

There was a kind of beauty which transcended age, gender and personality, the woman in front of Ning Ning certainly was that kind of beauty.

Lian Lian.

The granddaughter of the founder of Lian Company.

Throughout her life, she had never displayed any political savvy or intelligence. This woman who did not even complete high school had often performed foolishly compared to her siblings and cousins who had graduated from famous schools. But even then, she remained as the grandchildren her grandfather doted on the most, holding the highest stake of the company.

Because her smile was one of an angel's, innocent and cute.

That was why the old master was not the only one who liked her, there were a lot of others. These people were people of all ages, most were rich men from rich families, there was even a fugitive who escaped from prison to help her, helping her become who she was today, establishing her vagabond reputation.

"As for me, I initially wanted to pick Mei Xin to be the female lead." Lian Lian said, "Because she is the prettiest actress in show business."

"Why didn't you pick her?" Ning Ning asked.

"Because I found out that even though she qualifies as a celebrity, she does not qualify as an actress." Lian Lian sighed softly, "She cannot portray two characters at the same time."

Celebrities and actors had gradually become two different kinds of careers since an unknown period in time. The former depended on popularity, the latter depended on acting skills. Most of the time the two didn't go together, if someone were to achieve both statuses, the person would definitely be a megastar.

"As for you, your acting skills could barely pass." Lian Lian opened her eyes and looked at Ning Ning. "But you are not pretty enough."

Li Bo Yue spoke before Ning Ning had a chance to open her mouth.

"Our Ning Ning is certainly not that spectacular in real life, or you could say that she is not as spectacular as what you'll see on screen." Li Bo Yue said with a smile, "There is no hurry to start filming this movie anyway, how about this? Let's talk after <<The Great Empire>> has begun airing."

Lian Lian tilted her head and looked at him for a moment before nodding. "Deal."

She then turned and smiled at Ning Ning. "I will wait in anticipation to see how you will look on screen."

The days flew by as she waited.

<<The Great Empire>> successfully wrapped up filming, Ning Ning as one of the main stars naturally had to do a series of promotions, she was as busy as a bee. In the meantime, Li Bo Yue informed her that he had received the call from Yan Qing's side, asking if Ning Ning was willing to act as the supporting character—Yun Lin.

"What did you say?" Ning Ning asked.

"What do you think?" Li Bo Yue waved his hand casually. "I told them to go to hell."

"...You really said that?" Ning Ning was shocked.

"Are you dumb? Of course I said that in my mind." Li Bo Yue gave her a look of disdain. "I did not verbally agree or disagree, I just glossed over it. I will tell them to go to hell if you land the Lian Lian role, otherwise, falling back on the Yun Lin role is not bad either."

"...Wow, how cunning."

"Whom did I do it for!!"

Later on, <<The Great Empire>> started broadcasting.

It was first aired online, then on television. Ning Ning also watched it on her computer at home the day it aired—mainly to look at the audience's comments.

As an actress widely known as a vase, she had fans...mostly haters. This group of haters had their own sense of justice. They would deem a movie as bad, as long as her name appeared in the credits. A movie would be a terrible film if she was the lead character or the supporting character.

So before the show started airing, there were already quite a lot of negative comments: "I feel bad for my Movie Emperor Chen", "I feel

bad for my Little Zhu", "I feel bad for my Sister Rou". They wrote that they felt bad for every single important character once, it was as if acting in the same show as Ning Ning would forever pull down their intelligence and acting skills.

All these commotions stopped abruptly after the first episode aired.

"Her Royal Highness Princess Qing Luan!"

A graceful and poised Ning Ning appeared on screen accompanied by the shrill shout of a eunuch.

She walked in from the entrance. Every minister, general, eunuch and court lady bowed down as she walked by.

Then, she stopped in front of Chen Shuang He and blandly said, "Raise your head."

Chen Shuang He pursed his lips and furrowed his brows in the shot, looking as if he was resisting something, but he failed and slowly raised his head. He tried his best to hide the ambition in his eyes as he carefully looked at her.

She looked at him without expression before slowly cracking a smile at him.

There was a type of smile which transcended age, transcended gender, transcended personality, that type of smile had to be the smile that she was displaying right now.

Once this smile appeared in the shot, countless people reacted in countless different ways.

A hater quickly searched the end of the episode to look at the credits after being stunned for a moment, he wanted to make sure he was not seeing things, thus he used the eye drops three times before typing a single comment: "The Ning Ning I have seen in the past might have been a fake, this is the real Ning Ning."

A famous movie critic on Weibo recovered from their shock and deleted the pre-written thousand-word bad review, then opened a blank document to start writing: "The most amazing smiles in the history of film: number one.....number two.....number three.....number ten, Ning Ning. The smile she debuted on <<The Great Empire>> reminds people of the famous painting <<Mona Lisa>>. It was equally mysterious, people are unable to grasp whether she was happy, disgusted, scared or angry...This time I think we need to get an emotion analysis software from the Amsterdam University to analyse the percentages of emotions in her smile."

Li Bo Yue made a call as he watched his computer, "What are the ratings now? Oh...hahahaha!"

"Dad..."Chen Shuang He laid on a sofa within the family theater of his villa, his patience had reached its limits. He turned around and gritted his teeth. "You have already rewind this thirty-two times, can we have a break and finish the episode first?"

Chen Guan Chao seemed to not have heard what he said, smiling as he rewind the show back to when Ning Ning entered the scene. Upon seeing this, Chen Shuang He wailed mournfully as he covered his eyes with his hands.

"Meow." An orange fat cat jumped on the table, its paw was stepping on the keyboard. An arm grabbed the cat down from the keyboard and gently patted it within an embrace.

The owner of the white-gloved arm was Wen Yu.

He looked at the computer screen without blinking, watching Ning Ning on the screen. Her face was reflected in his eyes, but another person appeared before him.

"...You Ling?" He said softly.

He unwittingly stroked the cat harder as the name escaped his mouth. The orange cat meowed and leapt off his lap, its tail swept Wen Yu's phone off the table to the floor.

Wen Yu bent over and picked his phone up then silently looked at it... silently looking at Ning Ning's number on the screen.

A few minutes later, Ning Ning's phone rang.

Ning Ning pressed the mute button and looked at the screen, it was an unknown number.

"Hello?" She answered the phone.

"It's me." Lian Lian's voice rang out from the other side of the call, her voice had a trace of arrogance. "I am watching your performance in <<The Great Empire>>."

"What do you think?" Ning Ning asked.

"You do look better on screen." Lian Lian said.

"Then..." The corners of Ning Ning's mouth slowly turned upwards into a smile. No matter how many times she had experienced it, she would feel full of anticipation when she received a new role.

"The female lead is yours." Lian Lian said, "Right, there's something

I forgot to tell you."

"What is it?" Ning Ning asked.

"I heard that you auditioned for Yan Qing's film?" Lian Lian asked.

Ning Ning's heart skipped a beat, she did not know if Lian Lian had a deeper meaning in bringing this up now.

"I'm different from her, I don't like to preach or talk about life values." Lian Lian laughed, "To be honest, the reason I invested in this film is for fame and fortune. It's a commercial film under the guise of being adapted from a true story. I want more audience, higher box office and better reputation."

Such a big appetite.

"So I looked for the best screenwriter, the best director, and you." Lian Lian told Ning Ning, "Don't disappoint me. You have to portray me well...and Mu Er as well."

The script was quickly sent to Ning Ning.

Film Title: < < Trial of the Witch > > .

Female Lead: Lian Lian.

Female Supporting Role: Mu Er.

Ning Ning opened it to take a look, it was really an extremely stereotypical story.

Lian Lian and Mu Er were a pair of siblings, they were both born into the same poor family, both dropped out of school at the same age, both had an annoying little brother, they also had the same ambition of becoming a star on television one day. They were originally supposed to continue living the same lives, but in the winter of 1997, a man found Lian Lian.

He said to her, "Greetings, Young Lady."

Lian Lian, "Young lady? You must have mistaken me for someone else."

"I did not make a mistake." The man took off his hat and smiled at her politely. "You are the granddaughter of Lian Company's founder who had led a wandering life in poverty, a true to life young lady."

Thus the lives of the two girls branched out from here.

And the name of this man that had changed the destiny of Lian Lian was...

Ning Ning's fingers which were holding the script turned slightly pale as they trembled slightly.

She looked at the name and quietly read it out, "Pei Xuan..."

Chapter 76

76: Whom Do You Listen To

Upon seeing the name, Ning Ning felt like she had made an extremely big mistake.

"It's over..." She murmured quietly, "My audition video..."

This Pei Xuan, was it the Pei Xuan she knew?

If that was the case, wouldn't that mean that he knew Lian Lian? And based on the script, it looked like the two of them had a pretty good relationship?

Then would she have shared the video with him?

Ning Ning frantically called Lian Lian and asked, "The name of the male lead is Pei Xuan?"

"What about it?" Lian Lian asked.

Ning Ning did not directly ask about her relationship with Pei Xuan, she beat about the bush instead. "This name seems to be the same as the male lead in Yan Qing's film..."

"So what?" Lian Lian said, "I will get someone to tell her to change the name."

Ning Ning, "..."

She really was an unreasonable young lady.

"I just read the script." Ning Ning said, "I have some doubts about Pei Xuan's place in it. President..."

"Stop. Never call me President Lian, Madam Lian or Sister Lian." Lian Lian suddenly interrupted her, "If you must, call me cutie."

"Cu, cutie..." What kind of weird way of addressing a person is that? Ning Ning's mouth twitched.

"Hmmm." Lian Lian answered proudly, "Speak."

"The character Pei Xuan, he is your benefactor right?" Ning Ning said without a change in tone, "It was him who found you and brought you back to the Lian family, mediated your relationship to allow the Lian family to accept you...You said that this story is adapted from a

true story, what happened to him in the end? Are you still in contact with him?"

"Why are you asking about that?" Lian Lian said with caution.

"I'm just a little curious." Ning Ning laughed as she flipped the script, intentionally making the sounds of paper rustling. "From the story and character design, he is an overbearing CEO type of male lead, why did the two of you not end up together?"

"..I myself don't know why the two of us did not end up together." Ning Ning seemed to have pointed out something that was bothering her, Lian Lian sighed softly.

Lian Lian was once a beauty that made millions swoon and had countless men under her thumb, but she was still single till this day for reasons unknown, no one knew who she truly cared about.

Ning Ning felt nervous asking this, she was afraid that Lian Lian would answer with, "I loved him so much, how could he bear to leave me?"

Then she would be another Yun Lin, turning into a dangerous person because she was in love with a dangerous man. It was especially dangerous for Ning Ning as she had to enter Life Theater from time to time.

"Maybe it was because he was not handsome enough?" Lian Lian answered, "Or maybe because he was too old, that was why he felt ashamed in front of me? So he chose to give up and let me have the freedom to choose someone younger and more handsome?"

Ning Ning, "..."

"After all, I am a little fuzzy regarding the memories associated with him." Lian Lian answered lazily, "On the contrary, my grandfather, siblings and servants in my house remember him well. My grandfather is getting on in his years, I have a poor relationship with my siblings, so Pei Xuan was written according to what my servants remember. They had a good impression of Pei Xuan, so he will be portrayed as a good person in the script, rich and gentlemanly, with quite good looks as well."

The way she said it would sound ungrateful to anyone, because she would not have had the riches she did today if not for Pei Xuan. She could have led the life of her childhood buddy Mu Er—dropping out of highschool, working at the family restaurant, marrying the boss of a video store, getting married and giving birth at a young age, getting wrinkles from the stress of dealing with her husband and their

mischievous son, getting fat when she reached midlife, experiencing menopause early.

But Ning Ning knew that there was another possibility.

Lian Lian had been replaced by a customer of Life Theater the day she was found by Pei Xuan, causing her to have vague memories—like You Ling from <<The Person Within the Painting>>, being unable to remember the specifics of what had happened.

Ning Ning could not help but breathe out deeply. If that was the case, things would be a lot easier to handle, at least she did not have to deal with Pei Xuan immediately.

The two of them spoke for a little longer. At around ten at night, Lian Lian said, "I need my beauty sleep." Then immediately hung up.

"She really is a carefree woman." Ning Ning muttered then slowly turned around and looked at the purse beside her.

She opened the purse and slowly took out a ticket.

Life Theater, ordinary ticket.

It was the one she obtained in <<Person by the Pillow>.

Pei Xuan had personally created a tragedy in Yan Qing's life, then made use of her pain and despair to summon three movie tickets. Pei Xuan had intercepted two of them, but Ning Ning had hidden the one in the wedding gown. In the end, she got into a traffic accident. The moment the flames erupted into the sky, Ning Ning had returned to the theater along with the ticket.

It was hard to explain, but it completely followed the rules of the theater—the ticket on the audience will remain on the audience's body, no matter if the audience was inside the movie or out of it.

"Rule number one, a person would at most receive three tickets from the theater." Ning Ning held up the ticket and muttered, "Rule number two, there is no restriction on the number of tickets you can get from another person...regardless of the methods of acquisition."

The more rightful way would be like the way Ning Yu Ren chose to buy the tickets.

There were also cruel methods, like how Pei Xuan chose to ruin another person's life, then intercept the person's chance at changing their life, seizing the person's movie tickets.

"Is there no other way to acquire tickets besides these two?" Ning Ning asked.

She looked at the ticket, the ticket looked back at her. The ticket could not answer any of her questions, but one person could.

Half an hour later, a car door opened. Ning Ning closed it on her way out, looking up in front of her.

As if it was an oil painting that would never fade, a sculpture that had existed since thousands of years ago, Life Theater stood quietly in front of her, the Doorman stood quietly in front of it.

"No." Boss Qu answered immediately when faced with the question Ning Ning posed to him.

"Are those really the only two methods?" Ning Ning frowned. "Then wouldn't the relationship between customers be..."

"It is a competitive relationship." Boss Qu said coldly, "Everyone wants more tickets, better tickets."

Ning Ning understood what he meant by that.

More tickets would mean more chances to change the past. Better tickets would mean better chances to change the past.

"It's not easy to change the past..." Ning Ning looked down and sighed. "Rule number three, a person may change the main character's fate at most two times. If someone did it more than twice, that person would have to pay a price. For example, death..."

"Something worse than death." Boss Qu said blandly.

Ning Ning was stunned, she looked up at him, scrutinising the snow-white mask on his face.

"They will end up like me." A mocking laughter rang out from behind Boss Qu. The two of them looked in the direction of the laughter and saw Shi Zhong Tang standing at the entrance. He knocked on the mask on his face, making a pleasing and crisp sound.

Changing the fate of a main character thrice would result in a fate like his—becoming a masked person.

"But don't worry." Shi Zhong Tang turned around with a laugh, looking to his side. "The movie today is very safe. Not only is it safe, it is also very warm and hilarious."

Ning Ning looked at what he was looking at and saw a new poster on the wall.

Title: < < My Angel >

Starring: Mu Gual

...At a glance, Ning Ning thought it was a weight loss motivation film.

Because the main character on the poster was someone who was obese. He was not over fifteen years old, but was already over two hundred kilograms.

He was standing in front of a mirror while wearing a suit that was obviously stolen from his father's wardrobe, the buttons on his belly had already burst, revealing a round belly.

He was hugging a gift box with his left arm. In the box was a toy train, a bamboo copter, a robot, Saint Seiya2 cards, etc. He was holding a love letter in his left hand, looking like he was afraid of forgetting his lines as he read it to his reflection in the mirror while blushing. The love letter was partially obscured, Ning Ning could only see the starting part, "You are my angel..."

"...Teen...romance movie?" Ning Ning said doubtfully as she turned back.

"It would be a romantic film only if the confession was successful, otherwise it would be a friendship movie." Shi Zhong Tang shrugged. "Isn't there a saying, you're a nice guy, but I cannot be with you, we're better off as friends."

Ning Ning turned around and looked at the teenage boy on the poster again upon hearing this. She had the feeling that he gave off an aura of melancholy from head to toe, she even felt like taking out a dog treat to feed him...for the lonely dog he was.

"What are you waiting for?" Shi Zhong Tang reached out a hand to Ning Ning. "Come in quickly and watch it with me."

"...What are you trying to do?" Boss Qu reached out and grabbed Shi Zhong Tang's wrist, telling Ning Ning in a low voice, "Go home, this movie is not some damned romance film."

"A friendship film is not bad as well." Shi Zhong Tang winked at Ning Ning. "Although it's sad to be rejected by a person, but you would still be able to have one more friend, the two of you can face any trials and tribulations together, look for clues together, find answers together. It would be nice...you don't have to be alone again."

Ning Ning was taken aback by his words.

There was a deeper meaning in Shi Zhong Tang's words. The last time he said 'you're not alone' was at the end of <<Person by the Pillow>>. What he said before that phrase was 'You don't only have

enemies, you have friends too'. It looked like he had an ulterior motive in wanting Ning Ning to watch this "friendship movie".

Or this "friendship movie" was more than met the eye, or he had something to tell Ning Ning in private...at least something that he didn't want Boss Qu to hear.

Why?

"What's the use of finding out more?" Boss Qu sneered at Shi Zhong Tang. "If there are no means to an end, there will only be more pain the more you find out!"

Ning Ning was stunned.

...This sentence was familiar too. "It's more painful the more you know", what followed was "so it's better to be ignorant". This was Boss Qu's principle behind his actions in <<Republic Circus>>. He did not let his daughter know about anything, raising her in his meticulously crafted world. But that world was not real, things were still happening no matter if she saw them or not, the result of not knowing anything was her not being able to do anything about it, not being able to do anything in time.

The two of them were still arguing as she went deep into thought. It looked like they had already argued about something many times while Ning Ning was not around, the argument today was a continuation from the day before. In the end, Boss Qu looked angrily at Ning Ning. "Listen to me!"

Shi Zhong Tang also looked at Ning Ning with a smile. "Ning Ning, whom will you listen to?"

Ning Ning looked at him, then looked at Boss Qu. She suddenly shoved the ticket in her hand into Boss Qu's hands, then rushed towards Shi Zhong Tang. When he saw her walk over to him, it was like a flower had bloomed in his eyes. He smiled as he grabbed her hand. They looked like an eloping couple, rushing into the theater amidst the angry shouts of Boss Qu.

Ning Ning glanced back then turned her head with lingering fear. "I hope I don't burn to death this time."

"It will be fine." Shi Zhong Tang interlocked his fingers with hers and smiled. "I will die with you."

Ning Ning did not take his words seriously as she rolled her eyes and asked, "Why did you call me in here? Do you have something to say to me?"

"Actually, I am not the one who wants to talk to you." Shi Zhong Tang looked in another direction. "He is the one who wants to talk to you."

Ning Ning turned around and saw a group of masked people looking at her quietly. A fat arm suddenly pushed the crowd apart and emerged from them, walking up to her.

It was a young and obese—estimated to be over two hundred kilograms—masked person.

The mask on his face had eyes and nose, but there was no mouth.

1This translates directly to papaya.

2This is a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Masami Kurumada. The story follows five mystical warriors called the Saints who fight wearing sacred sets of armor named "Cloths", the designs of which derive from the various constellations the characters have adopted as their destined guardian symbols, and empowered by a mystical energy called "Cosmo". The Saints have sworn to defend the reincarnation of the Greek goddess Athena in her battle against other Olympian gods who want to dominate Earth.

Chapter 77

77: Identical?

There was no mouth on the mask, there seemed to be no mouth under it as well.

The masked person in front of her was gesticulating with his hands and feet, trying to express something to Ning Ning, but he was only able to make meaningless sounds. He tilted his head to think as he saw Ning Ning's blank expression, then abruptly took something out from his pocket and attempted to shove it in Ning Ning's hands.

It was a ticket.

There was a stamp on it, on the stamp was his portrait.

A main character ticket.

Ning Ning got frightened and took a step back after she took a good look at it, she waved her hands repeatedly. "I don't want that."

The masked person tilted his head again. He kept the main character ticket, then searched around with his other hand and took another ticket out from his breast pocket.

An ordinary ticket.

"Ah, ah..." He reached out with the ordinary ticket towards Ning Ning, he seemed to be asking, would this do?

Ning Ning looked at the ticket then looked at him. She still did not dare to take the ticket, because it was clearly mentioned in Ning Yu Ren's will: "Unless it's a last resort¹, never accept a ticket from a staff member." Did the ticket here refer only to the main character ticket, or did it include any other ticket?

"Alright, I told you she wouldn't take these." Shi Zhong Tang placed his arm over Ning Ning's shoulders and winked at the masked person in front of him.

The masked person's shoulders drooped like a deflated balloon.

The movie was about to start now, Shi Zhong Tang pulled Ning Ning over to the seats and sat down.

"What exactly is going on?" Ning Ning was incredulous. "What did

he want?"

"He wants to get in your good books." Shi Zhong Tang said with a smile, "So that you will do him a favour."

"...What favour?" Ning Ning looked at him.

"There's no rush." Shi Zhong Tang turned her face towards the screen. "How can you ask for a favour without offering something up? If you won't accept the ticket, then he has to offer you something else."

Upon finishing, he turned around and looked at the masked person beside him who was unwilling to leave. He said blandly without a smile, "You should leave, the movie is about to begin."

The masked person looked at him then at Ning Ning, before turning around with difficulty as he left unwillingly.

"...Why does it feel like you are bullying him?" Ning Ning could not help but say after he left.

"Are you kidding me? Where do I have the time to bully a chubby kid?" Shi Zhong Tang pretended to be surprised as he looked at Ning Ning. "If I wanted to bully anyone, it would be you."

Ning Ning was taken aback by his words.

"I'll make you cry, make you hate me." Shi Zhong Tang smiled and said, "Then I'll help you wipe your tears, tell you that I was joking, that I actually love you the most. I'll wait for you to let your guards down, then I'll..."

He took advantage of when Ning Ning had her guard down, suddenly pinching her face, turning her mouth into an 'o' shape.

"...Shi Zhong Tang!!"

Amidst Shi Zhong Tang's laughter and Ning Ning's angry shouts, the lights dimmed and the main theme started playing.

"My angel talked to me today, she said I am as fat as a watermelon." The cracked voice of a teenage boy rang out, his voice was filled with love and helplessness. "My angel smiled at me. She laughed at my singing, saying that it sounded like a duck. For the sake of making her laugh, I quack, quack, quack..."

Ning Ning was speechless.

"You didn't even get angry from that, you could still quack, quack, quack." Shi Zhong Tang sighed in the darkness. "I believe in love

again."

"...Impossible." Ning Ning refused to believe that this was a youthful romantic film based on her observation and the theater's usual quirk. Her expression turned dark. "No one could endure such humiliation. It's even less likely for a teenage boy or girl. My angel...might not indicate love, it might mean that he intends to send her to heaven to meet God later."

"...You are too nervous." Shi Zhong Tang said.

Ning Ning looked at the screen with fear and shook her head. "Based on my past experiences, even if I raise my vigilance tenfold it still wouldn't be enough."

It was all lessons taught in blood, trauma caused by deaths.

"...It's not all bad, wasn't there some good things as well?" Shi Zhong Tang's voice rang out from beside her, it was filled with love and helplessness. "...In your opinion, am I good or a bad thing?"

Ning Ning was stunned. The feeling of weightlessness came over her before she could answer.

"My angel talked to me today, she said I am as fat as a watermelon."

"My angel smiled at me. She laughed at my singing, saying that it sounded like a duck."

"For the sake of making her laugh, I quack, quack, quack..."

Accompanied by the singing voice of the teenage boy, her surroundings turned blurry. Once the song slowly disappeared, her vision slowly became clear, she stood in a messy room.

There were people in uniform walking around her.

A few teenagers in uniform walked towards her and asked, "Mu Er, are you getting your eyes tested first or height measured first?"

The room was huge, there were not only students in it, there were several people in doctor's coat as well. Beside every white coat was an instrument, there were instruments for eyesight tests and instruments for heart and lung tests. There were queues of varying length in front of the different instruments, the students in the queues were whispering to one another, everyone had a piece of paper in their hands.

Ning Ning looked down and saw that she was also holding the same piece of paper, the heading was 'physical examination form', the bottom part was already half filled, including her name, age, height,

heart and lungs (test result).

"I'm going to do the eyesight test." Ning Ning raised the physical examination form in her hand. "I have already measured my height."

"Then I'll go with you." The uniformed teenager said.

The two of them arrived at the eyesight test. Ning Ning handed over the physical examination form to the doctor. The doctor looked at her with a weird look before asking, "Didn't you just get your eyesight tested?"

Ning Ning was taken aback, "No, I didn't."

"You did, I remembered it very clearly." The doctor looked quite young, he seemed to have graduated from school not long ago as he was full of the aura of a student. He smiled at Ning Ning and said, "165cm tall, weighing in at 90lbs, chest 88cm, right?"

Ning Ning compared her results to what the doctor said. She was surprised to find out that written on the physical examination form was height 165cm, weight 90lbs, chest 88cm...he was actually right about everything.

"...eyesight 2.0." The doctor said in the end.

"Ning Ning looked up and said, "Impossible."

After a series of tests, the results of her eyesight was revealed—0.2, the digits were exactly in the opposite places.

A person with 2.0 eyesight could become a pilot, but her? Any person who was at a little distance away would become a mosaic in her eyes, that was why she was very sure that it was impossible when the doctor said 2.0.

Ning Ning treated this incident as a brief interlude and was about to leave with her form. The doctor muttered behind her at that moment, "That's strange, there really are two identical people..."

There were not just two identical people, there were two identical scripts as well.

The uniformed teenager invited Ning Ning to go home together after the examination. Ning Ning did not reject the offer, because she didn't even know where she lived. It was when the other party sent her to her destination that she looked at a dirty little restaurant dazedly with a bag of snacks in hand. The entrance had a sign which read—Friendship Bistro.

The door opened and a little fatty wearing the same uniform

walked out.

The uniforms in this era were hard to look at, all of them looked oversized on a student regardless of the actual size, they would be as baggy as a glove puppet, but that was not the case for this fatty. He made a large uniform look small.

The little fatty took a look at Ning Ning, then looked at the comely uniformed teenager behind her before he suddenly turned back and said, "Mom, Mu Er brought a customer back."

Not long later, an equally fat woman came rushing out, she forcibly dragged the teenager inside and sat them down, his mother smiled widely. "Aiya, dear customer what would you like to have? I will give you a twenty percent discount seeing that you were brought here by Mu Er."

In the end a plate of fried rice was charged at fifty yuan².

A kid wouldn't have that much money on them, the expression on the Fat Woman's face immediately changed, she forced the teenager to call their parents to come over, then used some obscene language to force the other party to pay up before letting them go.

Ning Ning attempted to help but she was treated with a slap. She held her face and stood at the original spot. She looked at the little shop which had a foul atmosphere in front of her while in a trance, she watched as the uniformed teenager leave in tears, watched the face of the Fat Woman as she licked her fingers while counting the cash.

Everything...felt familiar.

She read out a line in her mind, "What are you looking at? Why don't you quickly go and wash the dishes?"

The Fat Woman suddenly stopped counting the cash and turned around to stare at Ning Ning, "What are you looking at? Why don't you quickly go and wash the dishes?"

Ning Ning stayed silent for a moment, she grabbed the remaining snacks on the table and walked towards the kitchen, she read out in her mind, "Hold on, where did you get the money to buy snacks?"

"Hold on." The Fat Woman's voice rang out from behind her, then a fat arm snatched the snacks out of her hands, "Where did you get the money to buy snacks?"

"Someone bought it for me." Ning Ning answered.

"Oh, go wash the dishes then." The Fat Woman sent her away casually, then opened the bag of snacks herself and put a handful into her mouth, then grabbed another handful to give to the little fatty.

"I don't want it." The little fatty turned his face away as he said in a muffled voice, "I have been losing weight recently."

"Why would you need to lose weight? Only girls need to lose weight, boys look better the way you are. The more portly the more stylish." The Fat Woman seemed to have a different perspective on attractiveness, or maybe he would be attractive in his mother's eyes no matter what. She smiled at the little fatty and said, "That's right, your birthday is coming up in a few days, do you have anything you want?"

Ning Ning had already entered the kitchen when the two of them were conversing. There was a stack of chopsticks in the water-filled basin. She rolled up her sleeves and started washing the dishes, muttering softly as she washed them, "Why would you need to lose weight? Only girls need to lose weight, boys look better the way you are. The more portly the more stylish..."

She knew whatever the Fat Woman was saying.

To be more precise, Ning Ning had seen them.

"What was the next line?" Ning Ning frowned and thought as she washed the dishes, a few minutes later she her brows unfurrowed and she mumbled, "I remember it now, it was Mu Er, you should stop attending school..."

The door behind her suddenly opened, the Fat Woman walked in and shouted at Ning Ning, "Mu Er, you should stop attending school. I will do the procedures for you to drop out in a few days, stay home and help out and look after your brother Mu Gua while you are at it."

Ning Ning turned back and looked at her and the little fatty behind her.

True enough.

She had transmigrated as Mu Er, the supporting female character of <<The Trial of the Witch>>—the film adapted from a true story she was about to take part in—a girl who dropped out of high school then worked at her family restaurant. In front of her was her mother Chen Ju and her little brother Mu Gua.

A vicious mother and a vicious little brother, the two of them tormented the little girl very badly...

"It is roughly the year 1997." Ning Ning turned back, she thought to

herself as she washed the dishes, "It is the beginning of the plot."

"You brat, did you hear me?" Chen Ju shouted from behind her.

"I heard you." Ning Ning lowered her head and ducked from the bowl that was thrown at her from behind. It was only after she had managed to dodge that she realised that it was wrong for her to have dodged that. According to the script, she should have been hit dead on by the bowl thrown by Chen Ju, causing her to faint. When she woke up she would find out that she had been withdrawn from school.

Would it affect the plot now that she did not faint?

Ning Ning turned around and was preparing herself for Chen Ju to throw another bowl, but she saw that Chen Ju was angered by the fact that she did not hit her target and walked to the side of a cabinet, reaching out to grab the feather duster that was on top of it.

"...Watch out!" Ning Ning shouted loudly.

But it was too late. The cabinet shook for a while before suddenly falling on Chen Ju, the cabinet fell flat on her as she screamed. Below the cabinet were her outstretched limbs that were twitching ever so slightly.

"...Mom! Get yourself together!" Two of their voices shouted in unison.

October 1997, the first day of the beginning of this story, Chen Ju who was originally an important antagonist in the film got injured and fell unconscious. Outside of the emergency room, Ning Ning and Mu Gua slowly turned their heads and looked at each other with a bewildered look.

...How should...she carry on acting in this movie?

"Who would torment me?" Ning Ning thoughts were in disorder. "Who would spoil him?"

1We had previously translated it as "even as a last resort" which was the mistake, this is the correct translation, apologies for the error.

2This equates to \$7 usd approximately.

Chapter 78

78: We've Tried Our Best

The siblings returned home after staying at the hospital till ten at night.

In the middle of the night, Ning Ning heard footsteps outside of her room. Although the person was trying his best to lighten his footsteps, but he was two hundred kilograms, no matter how hard he tried to lighten his footsteps, the house would shake along with every step he took.

"...Mu Gua." Ning Ning opened the door to her room and looked at the person outside. "What are you doing in the middle of the night instead of sleeping?"

Mu Gua froze and dropped something from the pile of things he was hugging.

Ning Ning bent down and picked the sausage up from the floor, then looked at the steamed buns, biscuits and fruits he was hugging. She asked him out of curiosity, "What are you doing? Eating this much for supper?"

"You, you won't make food for me in the future anyway." The little fatty narrowed his eyes, because walking a few steps caused him to be out of breath and full of sweat. He hugged the food tightly and said, "I want to stock up on food so that I won't starve to death."

...Bro, was your paranoia about being picked on triggered??

Ning Ning was exasperated.

Title: < < My Angel > >

Starring: Mu Gua

As a person who is heavily featured on the poster at the entrance of the theater—as the male lead for this movie—anyone's fate can change, anyone but you! You have to be spoiled, you have to bully your sister for fun, not the other way around!

"Why would I?" Ning Ning forced a weak smile. "I wouldn't dare bully you. Mama is going to get discharged from the hospital in a few days. If I starve you during this period, she would definitely kill me."

A few days later at the hospital.

"Sorry, we've tried our best." The doctors told them with a face full of regret.

Both Mu Gua and Ning Ning were hit so hard by a bolt from the blue so hard they were not able to focus for a long while.

"Although we've managed to save her life, she remains unconscious." The doctor turned around and looked at Chen Ju who was on the hospital bed and said with pain, "You two should be mentally prepared that she would never wake up again."

Mu Gua's lips trembled a little as he shouted, "Mo..."

"Mom!!!" A scream covered his voice. Ning Ning jumped on top of Chen Ju's unconscious body, wailing in agitation as she shook Chen Ju's arm with all her might. "Wake up, Mom! I can't live without you!"

How could the movie progress without you? Would Mu Gua's fate be changed just like this? Please, no. A person only had two chances to change the fate of a main character. She had already used one of them, she did not want to waste the remaining one on a hamster that was using all his might to stock up on food in the middle of the night instead of sleeping.

After her emotions had stabilised a little, the doctor asked, "Do you two want to do the discharge procedures?"

"No." Ning Ning wiped her tears, "I think my mother can still be saved."

"To continue and receive treatment in the hospital?" The doctor looked around, he seemed like he was looking for an adult that could make the decision. "Where is your father?"

"My father is not around anymore." Ning Ning looked at him in distress. "Don't worry Mr. Doctor, we will pay the medical fees. You have to cure her, Sir."

Without her, the remaining people could not act out the scenes.

Once they finished the subsequent procedures, the siblings dragged their tired bodies out of the hospital. An ambulance with a blaring siren passed them by and stopped at the hospital entrance. The doors opened, the doctors and nurses wheeled a stretcher trolley out of the ambulance and frantically pushed it into the hospital.

The emergency room sign lit up, a man with a crew cut buried his depressed face in his hands.

After a while, the sound of footsteps approached him before finally stopping right in front of him.

"Get lost, let the man have some peace and quiet." The Crew-cut Man said. He jumped out of the chair the moment he put his hands down. "Bro, Brother Pei, you're here."

The two lackeys who followed behind Pei Xuan looked at him. Pei Xuan took off his sunglasses. "What happened? We told you to look after a person, how did the person end up in an emergency room?"

"You can't blame this on me, Brother Pei." The Crew-cut Man cried, "She insisted on driving. I could not dissuade her, so I let her drive. Who knew she would immediately crash into a tree..."

Pei Xuan sighed, he placed his hand on the Crew-cut Man's shoulder. The two of them slowly walked around a little. He whispered into the ear of the Crew-cut Man, "Then you better pray that she can be saved, if not I will hang you on a tree."

The emergency room sign dimmed and the door opened. The doctor walked out, "Are the relatives of the patient here?"

The Crew-cut Man and Pei Xuan walked over frantically. "Here. Doctor, how is she?"

"Sorry, we tried our best." The doctor told them regretfully.

The Crew-cut Man was hit by a bolt from the blue so hard he was not able to focus for a long while.

Pei Xuan, on the other hand, pushed the doctor to the side and rushed into the room, looking at the unconscious teenage girl.

"Although we managed to save her life, she remains unconscious." The doctor walked over and told him, "You two should be mentally prepared that she would never wake up again."

Pei Xuan slowly turned his head. In that moment, the Crew-cut Man saw a noose strung up on a tree, his body swaying gently with the noose around his neck.

"Doctor!!!" The Crew-cut Man grabbed onto the doctor's arm tightly, his face was filled with mucus and tears. "I think she can still be saved!!!"

Later on, they filled in the hospitalisation forms for the teenage girl. Pei Xuan left the ward with a cigarette in hand because smoking was not allowed in the ward. A lackey took out a lighter and helped him light his cigarette. Just as the cigarette was lit, he suddenly heard

someone from the side said, "That scared me, the girl I just sent in looked exactly like another person...and it's not just her face—her height, weight and body measurements were all the same."

Hmm? Pei Xuan turned around to look, he saw a young man and woman in white coats not far from him. They looked like they had just joined the hospital as interns, they spoke without a filter as they talked about a patient.

He pricked his ears up and listened for a moment, then shot a look at the lackey behind him. The lackey understood and walked over, putting his arm around the male intern and dragging him off. After a while, the lackey returned to Pei Xuan's side. He quietly told him the information he had heard from the intern.

"There's a girl who looks identical to Lian Lian?" Pei Xuan raised his eyebrow, "What's her name?"

"Mu Lan, Mu Tou, Mu Ji..." The lackey listed off names for a long while.

"Could you not get back to me after you are sure of what you heard?" Pei Xuan frowned.

"This was how he answered me." The lackey's face was full of grievance. "It was too long ago, he couldn't remember clearly either."

Pei Xuan tsk-ed and asked, "Do you know where she is?"

"At Nineteenth Secondary." The lackey answered frantically, "That doctor said this. He saw the girl while doing a physical examination at Nineteenth Secondary..."

Later in the afternoon, Nineteenth Secondary.

"Dropping out?" In the office, the Headmaster looked up at Ning Ning.

Ning Ning nodded, she told the Headmaster what happened at home.

"Something like that actually happened." The Headmaster showed sympathy after listening to her story. "You aren't even going to come back after your mother recovers?"

Ning Ning lowered her head and thought about it. She was mainly considering the character specifications for Mu Er.

This was how Mu Er's story went. She was forced to drop out of highschool by Chen Ju so that she could sell her life to the family restaurant and take care of her little brother at the same time. In this

period, she got to know a regular customer, the boss of a video store. He could not match up to the young and pretty Mu Er in terms of looks or youth, but Mu Er was not picky. For the sake of leaving the family as soon as possible, she married this customer once she became an adult. Afterwards, she led the austere life of a commoner, taking care of her husband and educating her kid.

As of now, that plan had met with some setbacks. Chen Ju's current condition was equivalent to that of a potted plant at home, so Ning Ning had to drop out of school herself.

"I'm not coming back." Ning Ning looked up and told the Headmaster. "We need money for my mother's medical fees. My little brother has to study, I can only drop out and stay home to take care of the family restaurant."

The Headmaster couldn't say much about her unique situation, he sighed as he helped her with the paperwork for quitting school. Ning Ning immediately left school after the paperwork was done. A car passed by her as it drove at full speed before it stopped at the entrance of the school. The car door opened and the Crew-cut Man walked out with a lackey. He walked towards the school while burning with impatience.

In the other direction, Ning Ning walked into a market.

It had already reached the point of the day where the fresh vegetables were almost all sold out. The remaining vegetables were those that were left unsold, going at very low prices.

The scam shop could not continue operating. Without the Chen Ju who was rotten to the core to hold down the fort, if they were to continue running it with just a pretty young girl and a fatty who would go out of breath within a few steps, they might just end up getting sold in the streets.

To operate the restaurant normally, they could not miss out on doing groceries. Considering the fact that they were running low on cash, Ning Ning had to scrimp as much as possible. She walked back home with difficulty, holding the big bags of vegetables. She rounded off from the market, thinking of how to go about things in the future on the way back.

"Step one." She mumbled, "I have to sleep with these vegetables, so that little fatty would not hoard them..."

Before she could think of step two, a few neighbours rushed past her. One of them suddenly turned around and shouted at her, "Ahh,

Mu Er! Hurry up, your house is on fire!"

Ning Ning was stunned as she trotted back home.

Flames sprang up in the air in front of her.

A group of people was crowding in front of Friendship Bistro. A few kind neighbours were bringing buckets of water over and pouring them at the fire, but the fire was too intense and it was unsalvageable. In the end, she could only watch as Friendship Bistro slowly turned into ruins in the fire.

Ning Ning looked for Mu Gua from within the crowd.

"Sis..." Mu Gua sat dispirited on the ground, his face had spots of char, his clothes had a few holes burnt into them. Ning Ning was about to console him, but he turned around and told her pitifully, "I had been having cold meals for a few days, my stomach could not take it anymore, so I walked into the kitchen and tried to make a warm meal..."

Ning Ning, "..."

"I didn't even know how the kitchen caught fire, hic." Mu Gua hiccupped as he cried. Not only was his face charred, there were two white lines from his tears. He seemed to have wanted to seek solace from Ning Ning as he reached out to hug Ning Ning, his face leaning in...

"Slap!"

Mu Gua came back to his senses after a long while. He held his face and looked at her with disbelief. "You, you actually dare to hit me?"

Flames were dancing behind Ning Ning as she stared at Mu Gua coldly with an extremely scary expression.

Slogging her guts out at the family restaurant while taking care of her little brother—gone.

Getting to know a regular customer, a video store boss with average looks and a gentle voice—gone.

Casting herself off from her mother and brother when she entered adulthood by getting married to the video store boss, then giving birth to a son and a daughter—gone.

"...Fatass!" Ning Ning grabbed Mu Gua's collar with both hands. "Give me my character specification back!"

Chapter 79

79: Get Back on Track

In the hospital, the doctors and nurses were busy with work.

Chen Ju was lying on the hospital bed, there was a doctor standing by the bed who pointed at her and asked, "Did we contact the family of this patient?"

"We did." A nurse answered.

"Did they say when they will pay up?" The doctor asked.

"It seems like something happened to them." The nurse answered, "Their house was burnt down, now the two kids did not have anywhere to stay, they are borrowing money to get by."

"Such a thing happened actually happened." The doctor shook their head as they sighed. "When it rains it pours, but they can't just leave her here and ignore her."

Just as their voice trailed off, a weak voice rang out from behind them, "Doctor, I'm here to bring my mother home."

The two of them turned around and saw a pair of siblings standing at the door of the ward.

Ning Ning looked a lot more frail, even Mu Gua had slimmed down by quite a bit, after his originally fat face that hid his features had slimmed down, he was actually slowly starting to have the elegance of a teenage boy.

Once they finished the hospital discharge procedures, Ning Ning bent down and told Mu Gua, "Here, give me a hand and get mom on my back."

After the house burnt down, the two of them completely lost their source of income. Although Ning Ning tried her best to borrow money from relatives and friends, the world had more people that would give you a hand when you were successful than people who would throw you a bone when you were down. The money she had received from bitterly begging was only enough to temporarily rent a dilapidated apartment for the two of them to stay in—at least they did not have to resort to living in an unstable building—then Ning Ning found a job and finally made enough money to pay off Chen Ju's medical fees.

Since their life had become like this, they certainly could not afford to buy a wheelchair for Chen Ju, they could only use their strength to piggyback her home.

"Ok." Mu Gua acknowledged and walked to the side of the bed.

Ning Ning was hunched over, waiting for a long while, she looked back and was shocked, "What are you doing?"

Mu Gua was carrying Chen Ju but he did not put her on Ning Ning's back. Instead, he immediately walked towards the door. Upon hearing Ning Ning's shout, he yelled back without looking at her, "Why do you care?"

Ever since the house caught fire and Ning Ning gave him a slap, he had prematurely entered the rebellious phase. Now, if Ning Ning wanted him to go east, he would go west, if she wanted him to go to heaven, he would go to hell. He recently threw a tantrum about wanting to drop out of school and to start working so that he could go his separate ways from Ning Ning.

You can't! That doesn't suit your character specification, little brother!

Ning Ning frantically chased after him. She said in a low and gentle voice, "Aren't you going to have an exam this afternoon? Don't tire yourself out, just let me piggyback mom home."

"Aren't you also going to work in the afternoon? Why should you care if I'm tired?" Mu Gua answered stiffly, "Moreover, I don't even want to study anymore, why should I care about the exam?"

Ning Ning felt dizzy upon hearing that.

Little Fatty, you can't do that!

Your character specification clearly stated that you are a lazy hamster—passionate in hoarding food and running around aimlessly to slim down—but that version of you has an undeniable quality—a top student. Although your character made people despise you, but your results in school made you "that other kid" among the neighbours. Later on, you graduated with flying colours and found an excellent job.

Even with that, you remained as a fatty up to your forties, never slimming down.

...Not only are you slimming down now, you are also giving up on your only quality...

Mu Gua took two steps before turning back and frowning, "Sis,

what are you doing?"

"It's, it's nothing." Ning Ning held herself up with one arm on the wall, her other hand was pressing on her forehead. "I was just a little dizzy, it's fine now."

She put her hand that was pressing on her forehead down and walked towards Mu Gua. The two of them stood in front of the elevator, it then opened with a *ding*.

There were people in the elevator, a few men were pushing an empty wheelchair, all of them looked towards Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked at the man standing in the middle, then lowered her head and followed Mu Gua into the elevator.

The elevator door slowly closed in front of them, a gentle and familiar voice rang out from behind Ning Ning, "Which floor?"

"First floor, thank you." Mu Gua answered.

A hand reached out from behind Ning Ning and pressed the first floor (button).

But the elevator continued climbing up. The familiar voice laughed behind Ning Ning. "My apologies, we are going up."

"It's fine." Mu Gua said without care.

"You don't like to talk?" The familiar voice rang out beside Ning Ning's ear, his voice was especially close to Ning Ning this time.

"Haven't I been talking to you...Hey!" Mu Gua turned around and saw what was happening, he immediately turned into a hedgehog and angrily said, "What are you doing? Keep your distance from my sis!"

The elevator door opened with a *ding*. Mu Gua and Ning Ning gave way as the three men pushed the empty wheelchair out of the door. Mu Gua quickly pressed on the close door button after they went out.

The moment the elevator doors closed, the man outside slowly turned back.

Dressed sharply in a suit while wearing gold-rimmed glasses, beaming with a refined and cultured smile—he would smile this way as he cut steak for you, he would also smile this way as he pushed you into a sea of flames.

Pei Xuan.

The elevator door finally finished closing itself up, covering up his smile.

Ning Ning immediately breathed a sigh of relief, her shoulders drooped.

"What's with you? That was a huge sigh." Mu Gua clearly misunderstood the situation as he coldly said, "Do you like this type of man?"

"That's not it." Ning Ning denied it immediately, "I can't really stand that type of man, talking into my ear when we clearly don't know each other."

"Then why didn't you hit him?" Mu Gua was even more angry now.

"There were a few of them."

"You didn't even think things through like you just did when you hit me!"

The two of them argued as they walked out of the hospital. They were already almost at the doorstep of their home when Ning Ning came back to her senses.

"Are you tired? Do you want me to carry her?" She asked.

"No, we're almost there." Mu Gua said in a low muffled voice, "Quickly go cook, you have to go to work after lunch."

They had a simple lunch, a plate of cabbage and a plate of potatoes along with two bowls of rice.

The two of them couldn't even afford tables and chairs, they laid out newspaper on the floor and used them as a table, eating as they sat crossed legged.

"Hey." Mu Gua took out a folded piece of paper and tossed it at Ning Ning after he finished eating.

Ning Ning caught it then opened it up and took a look, unexpectedly, it was a poster hiring troupe actors.

"Quit your current job." Mu Gua said blandly as he picked up his bowl and chopsticks, "Didn't you want to be an actress? Give it a shot."

Ning Ning flipped the poster over towards him and pointed at the fine print at the bottom, "Welfare Troupe, unpaid position."

"I'll go to work then." Mu Gua snorted. "I can do a lot more things compared to a girl like you, I will definitely earn more than you as well."

Ning Ning smiled at him then put the poster aside and stood up. "Remember to go take your exams, get a good score. I'm going to

work."

Mu Gua remained seated with his back towards her, he suddenly asked the moment she opened the door, "Wasn't your dream to become an actress?"

Ning Ning held the door open and answered him with her back towards him, "Wasn't attending Tsinghua University your dream?"

Mu Gua turned his head around and looked at her.

Ning Ning did not turn around, she answered him blandly, "Between the two of us, there will be one that has to give up on their dream."

Mu Gua viciously hammered the ground with his fist the moment the door closed.

"Why do you not scold me? It's all because of me that you..." Ning Ning heard his shouting.

On the way to work, Ning Ning felt hazy.

"This fellow is feeling guilty?" she thought, "Why would he be guilty? This doesn't fit his character specifications."

She finally found a job with a lot of difficulty after the fire, this was the first time she had a brief respite since then. She started to think about the plans for the future, she thought about how she could let these two siblings—especially Mu Gua—go back onto the right track in life.

"But what is the right track?" Ning Ning felt even more hazy.

Lian Lian's autobiography could not be labelled as an autobiography as it wasn't completely true.

It had some truths. For example, Ning Ning definitely stayed at Friendship Bistro, she definitely did have a fat little brother. It also had some mistruths—the most obvious being Lian Lian—her sister who was born into the same poor family, who had dropped out of school, who had put up with an annoying little brother and had vied to be a big celebrity—did not exist at all.

"Lian Lian lied to me, we do not know each other at all." Ning Ning thought, "Friends ranging from those that I made in kindergarten to those in high school visited me, there were even friends from my childhood. I asked every one of them, but no one knew who Lian Lian is."

A person who did not exist.

Or you could say a person who had zero ties with her.

How could Ning Ning believe what Lian Lian wrote to be true? Maybe Lian Lian got to know Mu Er by coincidence, then coincidentally had a meal at their house, met her mother who ran the scam shop along with her fat little brother, then randomly decided to include them when she was writing the autobiography?

"Sigh, I can't figure it out, forget it." Ning Ning sighed. "There are more pressing matters at hand. I should earn some money and renovate the apartment, treat Chen Ju, then put everything back on track...but where do I get such a big amount of money?"

Ning Ning walked into the hotel she was working at with a heavy heart.

Behind her, the crew-cut man who had followed her all the way did not go in with her, he stood behind a tree and took out his pager instead.

Within the hospital, Pei Xuan's pager beeped.

"Apologies, I need to take a call." He smiled at the doctor in front of him, turned around and walked out of the door as he asked, "How is it?"

"It's as we've heard." The crew-cut man answered, "No dad, mom's a vegetable, there is also a little brother in high school. Besides that, there are no other relatives. Their house was burned down. She's now working after she dropped out of school. Working at a hotel, in severe lack of money...Brother Pei, I think we can make use of this person."

"Whether we can use her is not for you to say, I will decide." Pei Xuan answered blandly, "Continue observing her."

He returned to the ward after he hung up.

The discharge procedures were done. A lackey pushed a wheelchair out, a teenage girl was on the wheelchair, she was wearing a face mask which covered her true looks.

Pei Xuan reached out and touched her face. Her eyes were firmly shut, she seemed to be sleeping soundly.

"Once the plan starts, it cannot be stopped, I have to get everything back on track." Pei Xuan told her apologetically, "Apologies, I have to find someone to replace you, Lian Lian."

Chapter 80

80: Bait

"Mu Er." Her colleague Xiao Zhang talked to her secretly. "Do you need money?"

Ning Ning's poverty is a semi-public secret, she admitted honestly as she washed the dishes. "I always need money."

Xiao Zhang looked at their surroundings then continued to talk to Ning Ning in a secretive manner, "I have an opportunity for you to make big bucks."

Ning Ning, "Is it illegal?"

Xiao Zhang, "Of course not."

"Why are you making it sound like some underground dealing if it's not illegal? Just spit it out." Ning Ning said.

"It's like this..." It seemed that it was something that was very difficult to say, Xiao Zhang hesitated for a moment before telling her, "There is a big boss whose family is pressuring him to get married, but he does not want to get married at the moment, so he wants to hire a girl to act as his girlfriend temporarily..."

Eh, isn't this renting a girlfriend for the new year? Who would have thought that these things would exist in this time period, that is pretty trendy.

"This is an opportunity to make big money, but this doesn't seem to concern me." Ning Ning thought about it and said, "He can't bring two girlfriends home for the new year."

"It's not certain that he would pick me, what if he picks you?" Xiao Zhang tugged at Ning Ning while she whined, "The one who gets picked has to buy dinner for the other."

Ning Ning, "You could do away with the dinner, you could just give me the money that you would have used for the dinner instead."

Xiao Zhang, "...Oh."

The two of them went to an office building after work.

This boss made the entire process (seemed) like hiring an

employee, he even had closed door interviews. Ning Ning sat on the stool outside the room and quietly waited after Xiao Zhang entered. She felt that something was off, but she could not specifically point out what it was.

There were sounds of footstep approaching her, a man had walked over and sat beside her.

"Have I seen you somewhere before?" Pei Xuan smiled as he looked at her.

Ning Ning took a glance at him before lowering her head again.

"I remember now, we met at the hospital." Pei Xuan stated suddenly. "Is your mother doing well?"

Ning Ning shook her head gently.

"I have a patient at home too." Pei Xuan sighed again. "They had a traffic accident and became a vegetable at a young age, what about you?"

"...My mom too." Ning Ning answered softly, "A cupboard fell on her head and she became a vegetable."

"It must cost an arm and a leg to treat her." Pei Xuan stared at her hands, "What do you do?"

"...I work at a hotel." Ning Ning curled her fingers up. The weather was getting colder, the dirty dishes were piling up, causing her to have cuts and frostbites on her hands.

"You look young, you're still in high school right?" Pei Xuan said with pity, "It must be difficult to be working at your age, do you not have reliable friends or relatives?"

"...No." Ning Ning answered with extreme vigilance. Although Pei Xuan seemed to be casually conversing with her, he was actually trying to dig out some information from her.

Every move this person made and every word this person said had a motive attached to them. She did not believe that he would waste time on a random passerby. What was going on? What did he want from her?

At this time, the door flung open, Xiao Zhang walked out with a face full of delight. She ran over and pulled Ning Ning's hand, "Let's go, I'll treat you to dinner."

"You passed the interview?" Ning Ning looked up and asked.

"Yup." A man's voice rang out from behind Xiao Zhang. "Don't hurry off to dinner first, follow me to the bank on the other side of the street, I will give you a down payment."

Ning Ning's vision shifted onto the other person's face.

He was a big muscular man with a crew cut. He wore a gold chain on his neck and a gold watch on his wrist, looking like a nouveau riche.

Ning Ning's eyelids twitched, she had seen this person before.

It was at the hospital. When the elevator door opened, there were a few men standing behind an empty wheelchair, one of them was Pei Xuan, another was this man.

The crew-cut man led a few people to the bank across the street. He withdrew two hundred and eighty eight dollars for Xiao Zhang. Just as Xiao Zhang was happily counting the money, Pei Xuan crept up beside Ning Ning's ear and said, "How about...I hire you?"

"Hmm?" Ning Ning turned and looked at him.

"I need a person too." Pei Xuan smiled at Ning Ning with his eyes closed. "Help me act as someone."

"...Girlfriend?" Ning Ning asked on the surface, she had already prepared ten odd reasons to reject him. *What a joke! A person like him does not need a girlfriend, all he needed was a bait for tickets!*

He actually shook his head unexpectedly and said, "No."

"What is it?" Ning Ning asked.

Just as Pei Xuan was about to say something, Xiao Zhang ran over and shouted excitedly, "Ning Ning, I have the money! Go go go, I will treat you to a good meal!"

Ning Ning was pulled away by Xiao Zhang. She turned back repeatedly as she walked away, thinking that Pei Xuan would go after her, but he did not. He stood his ground with a smile on his face, not saying a word until Ning Ning and Xiao Zhang's figure disappeared behind the door. The crew-cut man walked to his side and asked doubtfully, "Can't we just directly give her the money? Why did we hire her colleague?"

"How would you feel if someone who is inferior to you in every way were to suddenly get rich?" Pei Xuan answered him with a smile, "Would you feel perturbed?"

A few days later, the news of Xiao Zhang's unexpected windfall

spread in the hotel.

Ning Ning was not the one who spread the news, Xiao Zhang was the one who could not help but brag about it.

After all, not many people liked to keep their good fortunes to themselves, Xiao Zhang was also someone who was not subtle. She told almost everyone, "I expected it to be difficult, but in the end, I just had to accompany the boss and talk to his mother for two hours. Just two hours, I was paid eight hundred dollars. His mother even gave me a bracelet, isn't it pretty? I wanted to return it, but the boss waved his hand and said there was no need, hehe..."

"The boss is really blind." There were people who envied Xiao Zhang, were jealous of her and hated her. They told Ning Ning privately, "I heard that you went with her for the interview, why didn't the boss pick you? You are way prettier than her."

"Maybe the boss likes her type." Ning Ning answered with a smile.

"Really? She's uncouth and loudmouthed like a country bumpkin, the boss prefers her type?" The fat female cook scanned her surroundings before lowering her voice and said to Ning Ning, "You see the way I am now? I was the prettiest girl in my village twenty years ago, can you introduce the boss to me? If he was willing to pick Xiao Zhang, maybe he would pick me."

Money moved human heart. The most important thing was that this money came easily, it seemed like all you had to do was to put in a little time and effort to be able to get a huge reward. Thus, beside the fat female cook, there were a few other female colleagues who approached Ning Ning and alluded to wanting her to introduce them to the boss and getting to know him.

When it came down to it, they were all just perturbed.

Ning Ning saw through that and had a trace of doubt, "Is all this...a show for me?"

If she was the real Mu Er—who dropped out of high school without any experience, who was also hailed the prettiest girl in class last month—a month later she was washing dishes at a hotel till her skin tore, perhaps she would really be envious, jealous and hate Xiao Zhang like the people around her and become perturbed.

Then, perhaps she would want to go back and try her luck with the other party.

But the other party was Pei Xuan.

Thus, Ning Ning only wanted to pretend to not know what was going on.

But this world did not give her a chance to pretend she didn't know anything.

The next day was a Friday, she went to school to attend the parent-teacher meeting. After the meeting, the homeroom teacher requested her to stay to have a private conversation.

"What?" Ning Ning said with surprise, "Mu Gua has not been coming to school recently? He... he leaves home at six in the morning everyday."

"But he has not been coming to school." The homeroom teacher said worryingly, "Did he make any friends on the outside recently? You should watch over him carefully, don't let him walk down the wrong path. This child has really good results. If he were to continue to study properly, he would definitely be able to get admitted to Tsinghua University."

"...I will talk to him." Ning Ning said in a low voice.

Next was a family trial which was at daggers drawn.

"Tell me!" Ning Ning blocked the door angrily, not letting Mu Gua who was outside the door enter. "Where have you been going to recently?"

It was dark outside of the door as it was already eight at night, the little fatty...you could not call him a little fatty anymore. Mu Gua who had turned into a slightly overweight person without anyone's notice was standing at the door. He casually pushed Ning Ning aside and forced himself through the door. He sat in front of the makeshift dinner table made of newspaper, picking up the unfinished bowl of rice Ning Ning had left on it then devoured it ferociously.

"Tell me!" Ning Ning walked over with huge strides.

Mu Gua ignored her as he ate with his back to her.

"...Did you look for a job behind my back?" Ning Ning frowned.

Mu Gua continued devouring the rice.

"Who said you can work?" Ning Ning's voice increased in pitch, "What are you working as?"

Mu Gua dropped the bowl and chopsticks on the newspaper with a *clang*, turning around and shouting at her, "You said one of us has to give up on our dreams, why can't that person be me?!"

What he said had extinguished her wrathful heart. Ning Ning stared at him in shock.

He opened his school bag, took out a bottle of hand lotion then shoved it at her. He looked down at the back of hands that were frozen and torn, saying in a muffled voice, "An actress's hands should not look like this, you have to take care of yourself."

Upon finishing the sentence, he turned back and continued eating. Once done, he quickly ran into the kitchen to wash the dishes, then frantically washed his face and feet before crawling into his blanket and said, "I'm going ahead to sleep, I have to go to work tomorrow...I, I will earn a lot of money so that your hands won't get damaged due to frostbites."

He seemed to be really exhausted, he started snoring not long after he lied down.

Ning Ning held the hand lotion as she stood by the bed, staring at Mu Gua for a very long time.

The next afternoon, Ning Ning was working at the hotel.

She brought a plate of squirrel fish¹ into a private room, a familiar voice rang out beside her as she placed the plate on the table.

"Miss Mu, we meet again."

Ning Ning turned around and looked at Pei Xuan's smiling face, she asked even though she knew the answer, "What is it?"

"Regarding my suggestion last time," Pei Xuan looked at her. "have you thought about it?"

Ning Ning looked at him and coldly said, "How much is the salary?"

"...Take a seat." He was the only person in the private room. Pei Xuan smiled as he stood up and pulled a chair for her. He said in a gentlemanly manner, "I ordered this table of dishes for you, we can talk after we finish eating."

After dinner, a driver drove them to a little villa.

Ning Ning felt some trauma as she looked at the villa in front of her. It was a western-styled white villa with a red roof. He seemed to like designs like that. His matrimonial home with Yan Qing looked the same as this one. What about the inside? Would it be filled with photo frames of a certain woman? Would each photo frame be hiding a peephole?

If not for the fact that she had informed her boss and colleagues of

where she was going beforehand, telling them to call the police if she did not go home the next day, Ning Ning would not have dared to follow Pei Xuan alone.

The door opened and a maid greeted them.

The interior was extremely similar to the villa he had designed for Yan Qing, but fortunately, there were no photo frames on the walls this time.

Pei Xuan told the maid to bring Ning Ning back to change her clothes. A white shirt and a big red skirt. hair tied behind her back with a red butterfly knot—she looked simple and generous, transformed from a village beauty to a rich young lady.

Pei Xuan handed her a contract after she sat down on the sofa. "Look at this."

Ning Ning picked it up and took a look. It was an official acting contract, the working hours were from seven in the morning to seven at night. Just like Pei Xuan had promised, the salary was very lucrative, it was twenty times of what she was making now.

On the other hand, there were a lot of terms and conditions.

"Once I take this job, I cannot back out halfway?" Ning Ning looked at Pei Xuan, "I cannot tell anyone what I'm doing?"

"Of course." Pei Xuan smiled, "Your colleagues are blabbermouths, I cannot guarantee that you are not one. I'm not like my colleague, I do not want a personal matter to be known to everyone."

Ning Ning assented and continued to read the contract.

"I have to follow your instructions and take part in your training until you are satisfied." Ning Ning looked at him, "What if the results are not satisfactory?"

"Read the next line." Pei Xuan said with a smile, "If I am not satisfied, I will fire you, but you will be paid for the time you have worked, I will account and pay you all the days you stay for."

Ning Ning continued to read, there was indeed a term like that.

She suspected that it was a fraudulent contract, so she seriously and repeatedly read the contract a few times, but Pei Xuan didn't seem to have placed any trap in this contract. Ning Ning did not know whether to be happy or sad about it, because there were two possibilities—One, he had yet set his trap up. Two, he had already set up the trap but she had not noticed it.

"How is it?" Pei Xuan asked, "Do you have any other doubts?"

"...Last question." Ning Ning looked at him. "What role am I playing? It is not stated in the contract."

"Patience." Pei Xuan leaned back on the sofa, his fingers holding a stick of cigar as he leisurely said, "Originally, I had a very good actress, but she had met with an accident halfway through, that is why I am recruiting you as a substitute. But even as a substitute, my expectations of you will still be very high...Oh, you changed your hand lotion? That brand is not bad."

Ning Ning curled her fingers which were on her knees.

The back of her hand was lathered in an imported rose-scented hand lotion.

Those types of hand lotion were very expensive, it was not something that a kid like Mu Gua should be able to afford, what exactly was he working as? What kind of job would allow him to earn so much money immediately? Who was turning everyone around her into baits, tempting her to bite on the hook?

The doorbell suddenly rang.

"Oh, someone's here." Pei Xuan turned around, then turned back and smiled at her, "From now on, you have to portray your role well—the mistress."

As he finished speaking, he put down the cigar and walked behind Ning Ning, standing respectfully like a butler.

The door opened. The maid led someone over, that person was wearing a school uniform—he had no other clothes he could wear, because his other clothes were all burnt in the fire. Although he looked a little fat, it was not very obvious. He had outstanding facial features but they were a little flat, he could be labelled as a pretty boy, but he was more of a hale and hearty pretty boy. He had a weird demeanor, he was naive and impulsive like a teenager, but also had the sense of heavy responsibility of an adult.

He looked around as he walked over—that was typical of a teenager, they would usually be curious about a new place or new things—but he was shocked once he saw Ning Ning, his eyes fixed on her.

"...Sis?" He shouted.

Ning Ning looked at him.

Mu Gua, you really are here.

1Squirrel fish is a well-known dish in Jiangsu cuisine, originally from Suzhou. It is prepared by deboning and carving a mandarin fish into an ornamental shape similar to a squirrel, and then deep-frying it in batter before dousing it in sweet and sour sauce.

Chapter 81

81: Flaw

There were many types of mistress.

For the sake of not letting Mu Gua find her out, she best acted as one who was completely the opposite of Mu Er.

Elegant, demure, someone who was well-educated, someone who had good posture at all times, someone who would look straight at the other party—just like Yan Qing.

With these considerations, Ning Ning quickly adjusted her sitting posture and expression. She turned around and looked at Pei Xuan, with a restrained attitude of a lady she asked, "And this is?"

"A new servant." Pei Xuan looked at her with an interested expression. "What do you think of him?"

Ning Ning turned and looked at Mu Gua, she smiled at him. "You look really young, how old are you?"

"...Sixteen." Mu Gua answered, his eyes looked towards her hands on her knees.

However, Ning Ning had turned her hands over when she adjusted her sitting posture, her palms were facing up, the back of her hands were against her skirt so the injuries on the back of her hands were up against her skirt as well. He could not see the features that would easily expose her identity, unless he grabbed her hands and took a good look.

"Why are you not in school at this age?" Ning Ning asked gently, her voice had the tone of pity from an older more privileged person talking to a younger less privileged one. "Working at such a young age, did your family go through some difficulties?"

"...Yes." Mu Gua peeked at her occasionally, his expression had traces of doubts, he seemed to be looking for similarities and differences between her and his sister.

Ning Ning was confident that she would not be noticed by him, but when she looked at Pei Xuan from the corner of her eye, she could not help but feel chills.

He was still looking at her with the same expression, now with a trace of coldness.

...What was she doing wrong?

No, it was not what she was doing wrong, it was that she was doing too much.

What kind of person was Mu Er? A pushover who grew up in a family which heavily valued sons over daughters. She was like any other teenager of the time, she too liked to idolise celebrities, she too wished to become an actress, but having a dream didn't mean that she had the skills.

In reality, no matter how talented a person was, when they acted in front of a person for the first time, they would normally be too nervous to perform as they usually would. Unlike what Ning Ning did, getting into character in a short amount of time, being so proficient that it seemed like she had been on stage multiple times, as if she had acted in countless shows in the past.

"...I got it wrong!" Ning Ning's back was covered in cold sweat after she figured it out. She thought to herself, "The one I am acting for is not Mu Gua at all, it's Pei Xuan. As someone who has never acted before, I should not portray a perfect mistress in front of him. I want to portray a mistress that seems perfect but is actually full of flaws!"

Thus, as she spoke to Mu Gua, she started to slouch bit by bit.

Just like someone who had never had any practice, after forcing herself to sit up straight for some time, her back would start to ache and she would go back to her original sitting posture.

Pei Xuan cleared his throat softly from the side and asked gently, "Miss, are you tired?"

Ning Ning reflexively straightened her back and frowned, leaning back in frustration, even her manner of speech started to become lazy, "That's right, I'm tired, I feel like drinking some water."

She did not move as she said that, only looking at Pei Xuan in anticipation. Spoiled and arrogant, used to the attentive care of men.

"...Mu Gua." Pei Xuan shifted his vision from her to Mu Gua. "Pour a glass of warm water for the Miss."

"Yes." Mu Gua immediately walked to the kitchen. He held a glass of water when he returned. "Miss, here is your water."

Ning Ning watched as he handed the glass over. If she reached out

to take it, her hands would be exposed to him, thus she looked at Pei Xuan. "I'm so tired that I cannot move a single finger."

Pei Xuan glanced at her then took the glass of water out of Mu Gua's hands, then fed her the water. Once they were halfway through the water, he turned and told Mu Gua, "You can leave for now."

After Mu Gua left, he spun around the glass in his hand and looked at the lipstick left on the glass and smiled, "That will not do."

Ning Ning tilted her head and looked at him. She had a look of someone who did not know how many flaws she had displayed just now, asking with anticipation and uneasiness, "How did I do just now?"

"Not bad." Pei Xuan smiled, he conveniently picked up a napkin and wiped the glass, the lipstick stained the napkin.

Ning Ning had an awkward look on her face as she watched him. She turned her face away and asked, "...Right, why is my brother here?"

"I saw him looking for a job all over the place, he even looked for a job at the docks, it was pathetic." Pei Xuan answered. "It just so happened that I had an opening here, so I hired him to work for me."

"What can he help you with?" Ning Ning asked.

Pei Xuan pretended to think about it for a moment then smiled. "How about you act for him?"

Ning Ning pursed her lips. "I don't know what you mean."

"If even the people closest to you can't recognise you," Pei Xuan lifted her chin and stared at her like a snake, "that would mean your acting skill is passable... Right, let me drive you back. The way your little brother ran away that quickly, there is a very good chance that he is going to check if you're at the hotel."

Ning Ning, "..."

The car sped back to the hotel.

By the time Mu Gua rushed over, Ning Ning had already changed back into her original get up, looking at him with surprise as she washed the dishes. "What wind blew you over? Are you here to see me home?"

"...Who's here for you?! I just happened to pass by!" That was what Mu Gua said, but he rolled up his sleeves and helped her wash the dishes.

The water flowed calmly, but her thoughts were not calm at all.

"What does Pei Xuan want me to do?" Ning Ning thought, "No, I should look at it from a different angle—what does he see in me?"

Good looks? There were so many people with good looks, she had not been grooming herself frequently in recent times. If a girl were to put all her efforts into working and not groom herself, she would be less charming in the eyes of a man.

Ticket bait? This was the biggest possibility. Was he falling back to his old plan? To build rapport through lies, make her despair, then intercept the tickets Life Theater sent her way?

...Then why was he dragging Mu Gua into this? Ning Ning looked at Mu Gua who was beside her.

"...Did you use the hand lotion I gave you?" Mu Gua asked as he washed the dishes.

"Yes." Ning Ning said.

"Then go rest at the side." Mu Gua immediately bumped her with his shoulder, knocking her away from the basin. He looked at her as if she was the black sheep of the family. "The hand lotion was very expensive, don't waste it."

"Then I won't use it anymore."

"...I've already bought it for you, just use it!"

The dishes were done amidst their bickering, Ning Ning and Mu Gua returned to their cramped rented house after bidding the boss goodbye. One of them took care of the still unconscious Chen Ju, the other went to the kitchen to warm up their dinner—this was a privilege from her job, they could bring home the leftovers from work.

"Little bro." Ning Ning decided to probe about his situation over dinner. "You previously said you have a job, what are you doing specifically?"

His chopsticks froze in midair, Mu Gua answered without a change in expression, "I make props."

Ning Ning, "...Huh?"

"Aren't you entering showbiz in the future?" Mu Gua grabbed a portion of the side dish with his chopsticks as he laughed. "I will enter as a prop master first, I can guide you as a senior when you come in later."

He said that so seriously that Ning Ning almost believed him. She wanted to laugh along with him, but she could not while knowing the truth. Thus, Mu Gua's smile slowly faded from his face after he laughed for a long time. He asked her cautiously, "Is something the matter?"

"What does a prop master do?" Ning Ning asked.

"They prepare props for tv shows and movies." Mu Gua answered.

Ning Ning, "Is it a period show or a modern show?"

Mu Gua, "Modern."

"Oh, how do they make blood spurt out from a body when someone gets shot in the cops and robbers shows I usually watch?" Ning Ning asked.

Mu Gua, "..."

"Also, in the gangster show that you used to often watch, they had opposing gangsters fight with knives, they even mashed beer bottles over people's heads." Ning Ning asked, "Were those beer bottles real or fake?"

Mu Gua looked at her quietly and smiled, "They are fake of course."

Ning Ning smiled as well, "I know that they are fake, but how are they made?"

They were made of sugar.

White sugar would be heated and melted, then poured into a wooden mold, they would be ready the next day.

"...They are made out of bubbles." Mu Gua answered, then he put a big portion of a side dish in her bowl impatiently. "Alright alright. I just got started, I'm still doing odd jobs, I've yet to learn about most things. I'll give you the answer after I have learned more from the prop master in a few days."

"...Okay." Ning Ning looked down and picked up some vegetables with her chopsticks, but she had no appetite, it tasted like wax in her mouth as she forced it down her throat. She said abruptly, "Let sis provide for you alright?"

The sounds of cutlery in front of her suddenly stopped.

"I will provide for you until you graduate from university," Ning Ning said, "then you can look for a better job and provide for me after."

The house fell silent, the sounds of cutlery rang out again after a short while, it sounded frantic and annoyed.

"I'm done." Mu Gua gathered up his bowl and chopsticks, then walked towards the kitchen. His footsteps suddenly stopped as he got to the kitchen door, he said in a muffled voice, "...Give me some time."

"Let me work for at least 2 months." Mu Gua had his back to her, she could not see what expression he had on his face. "I will stop being a prop master after I get two months' salary."

What prop master, he was basically just a prop...

The next day, the two of them sneaked out of the house one after another then met each other again at Pei Xuan's house.

Ning Ning changed into the clothings Pei Xuan had prepared for her again, she put on a showy lipstick, then sat on the sofa in the living room.

Two people were standing in front of her. One was Pei Xuan, polite and elegant, wearing a black suit. He reintroduced the person beside him just like the butler of the house would.

"This is Mu Gua, the new servant, he will serve you when I'm not around." He smiled. "But I want to punish him because of the nonsense he said yesterday."

Ning Ning fixed her gaze on the teenager in front of her.

He had also changed into another outfit—Pei Xuan probably had prepared it for him—it looked like the outfit of a servant from a western manor, it suited the little villa they were in.

On his face, was a mask.

A mask that had eyes but no mouth.

"As punishment," Pei Xuan smiled by his side, "from now on, he can only listen and watch, he cannot speak."

Chapter 82

82: Dual Roles

"Why must you do that to my brother?" Ning Ning stared at Pei Xuan with rage once the door was closed.

"You can chase him away," Pei Xuan said, "you can use whatever method you like."

Ning Ning was dumbfounded.

Pei Xuan swirled the wine in his hand. He pretended to pour the wine for Ning Ning in front of Mu Gua—once Mu Gua had left he started drinking it, he stopped being respectful as well, quickly climbing on top of Ning Ning's head.

"I will tell you what role you are portraying now." Pei Xuan said, "You will portray a lady from a rich family."

"How old?" Ning Ning asked coldly.

Pei Xuan scanned her with his eyes, "As old as you are now."

"What is the family business?" Ning Ning continued asking, "Is she the only child? If not, how many siblings does she have? Is she spoiled? What does she like to do regularly? What kind of people does she interact with..."

She asked a lot of questions at once. In the end, she took a deep breath and said with an embarrassed look for being overly agitated, "I have to know everything about this person so that I can portray her well."

I have to know everything about the person you want, so that I can figure out what you are scheming.

"I would have told you even if you didn't ask." Pei Xuan placed the wine glass beside him, stood up and said, "Follow me."

Ning Ning hesitated before following him.

The two of them went up to the attic.

There was a maid guarding the attic door, she took out a key and opened the door behind her upon seeing Pei Xuan's arrival.

So secretive, what could be inside?

The door opened—within the attic was a teenage girl.

The girl had her back to the door, she was sitting on a rocking chair by the window, the sun shone through the window as the sunlight beamed from where she was to the door.

Ning Ning followed behind Pei Xuan and slowly walked up to the side of the girl.

The girl's face was slowly revealed to her.

Ning Ning felt her heart starting to beat in a frenzy.

"You are to portray her." Pei Xuan reached out to touch the hair of the girl on the rocking chair. She had the exact same face as Ning Ning, they even had the same body proportions, they simply looked like they were made out of the same mould.

"...Who is she?" Ning Ning asked with difficulty.

"The illegitimate daughter of a big boss." Pei Xuan answered. "I found her and sent her to her father's side. The two of them liked each other a lot, the big boss had already prepared to officially acknowledge her two months later...Regretfully, an accident happened in the midst of this and she became a vegetable."

"...So you want me to pass myself off as her?" Ning Ning slowly looked up at him. "But I'm not her, I will eventually get exposed."

"That won't happen. I will train you." Pei Xuan said resolutely. The conversation took a turn, he smiled at her maliciously. "Moreover, you are already in the know, do you think you can still get out of this?"

Ning Ning was stunned by his words, she felt like she was rooted to the spot from being constricted by a venomous snake.

"That's right." Pei Xuan said. "From now on I will address you with another name. You have to immediately answer to that name, understand? Lian Lian."

Lian Lian...

Ning Ning looked down at the girl in the rocking chair again.

The difference between a sixteen-year old and a thirty-year old was too big, so Ning Ning did not recognise her in the beginning. Now that she had a closer look...Wasn't that Lian Lian? Wasn't she the woman that was labelled a witch because she received a lot of praises and criticisms for being with too many men?

"No." Ning Ning asked herself, "The Lian Lian in the future, is that

her or me?"

Half an hour later in the living room.

"Miss Lian Lian..."

"Who allowed you to speak?"

Mu Gua froze on the spot. Ning Ning, on the other hand, looked at him coldly while sitting on the sofa.

No matter who Lian Lian was, he was not supposed to be here now. Pei Xuan said she could use any method to chase him off, but what could she do? It would be useless even if she were to reveal her identity to him, that guy had never listened to her. Did she really have to physically force this boy who bought her a hand lotion to leave? She could only force him to leave with her words.

Moreover, words cut deeper than knives.

"You can only speak when I say so, understood?" Ning Ning was lying down on the sofa, her right hand that was wearing a black lace glove was holding her head up.

Mu Gua nodded gently.

"Alright." Ning Ning's attitude became more casual. "Now, sing a song for me."

Mu Gua hesitated for a moment before he started to sing. His voice was in the midst of cracking thus it was a little coarse. He had just sung two lines before Ning Ning interrupted him with her laughter.

"Hahaha, what were you singing?" Ning Ning staggered back and forth, she mocked him without hesitation, "Your voice is like a duck..."

The moment she said that, she suddenly shuddered. She remembered the opening theme of the movie.

"My angel talked to me today, she said I am as fat as a watermelon."

"My angel smiled at me. She laughed at my singing, saying that it sounded like a duck."

"For the sake of making her laugh, I quack, quack, quack..."

Mu Gua lowered his head as he gripped his hands tightly. Ning Ning could even see that his shoulders were trembling slightly. She did not know if her words had hurt him, she did not know if his face was that of shame or sadness either.

She watched him slowly look up and made three funny sounds.

"Quack, quack, quack."

Ning Ning did not want to laugh, but she had no choice but to act like it was funny and laughed. She suddenly felt like a good actress, a good actress could laugh when they felt like crying.

"That was awful." Ning Ning wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes as she gave Mu Gua an order, "You are not allowed to speak in the future. Pei Xuan was right, it's better for you not to have a mouth."

She saw Mu Gua's hands tightened their grip before they slowly loosened.

Even if they were separated by a mask, Ning Ning could still feel that he was really hurt...

Ning Ning felt sad and depressed as she thought: Why would you call a person like me an angel?

It was clearly the same face, why did she treat him so differently when she wore a different set of clothes?

"Sis, is dinner ready?"

At night, within the rented house, the door was kicked open with a loud crash. Mu Gua looked angry and tired, he walked in furiously then laid down on the floor with his limbs spread out.

"It's almost ready." Ning Ning who had reached home one step earlier was busy in the kitchen, she took out the time to glance back at him then shouted, "The floor is cold. If you want to rest, go lie on the bed."

Mu Gua, "I reek of sweat."

"Go wash up if you are sweaty." Ning Ning said.

"Turn around." Mu Gua said.

The moment Ning Ning turned around a smelly top was thrown at her, Mu Gua who was stripped to the waist laid down once again. "Wash the shirt first then wash me."

Ning Ning, "..."

Can she kill this whelp that was treating his sister like a maid?

In the end, she washed his shirt, seeing that Mu Gua was simply unwilling to get up, she even wetted a towel and helped him wipe his face and body.

When she was wiping his chest, Mu Gua suddenly grabbed her

hand with eyes closed. He opened his eyes. "Sis, are you tired?"

Ning Ning, "What?"

"You do whatever Mom tells you to do. Now that Mom is not here, you do whatever I tell you to do." Mu Gua turned around and looked at her. "You are not our maid, why do you never say no?"

Ning Ning, "..."

Because her character specification didn't allow her to say no.

Dual roles.

In the morning, both she and Pei Xuan would both act courteous without sincerity. She acted as a mistress full of flaws in front of Mu Gua, an upstart that was beautiful yet vicious. At night when she was with Mu Gua, she acted as a sister who was at his beck and call, going along with whatever he wanted most of the time, beautiful yet frail.

Maybe she was hanging on to a sliver of hope, that one day Lian Lian would wake up and end this farce, so that everything would return to what it was like in Lian Lian's biography that she had written.

"Isn't it good to have someone at your beck and call?" Thus she looked down at him and smiled. "Alright, let go."

He looked up at her smile. After a long while, he let go of her hand. She continued to labour without complaints as she wiped his body with the towel.

The next morning, Mu Gua left the house extra early. He did not choose to take any transport, he chose to have a morning run instead. The way he exercised unremittingly had caused him to slowly slim down, it perhaps had also made his mind a little clearer. He used five less minutes than usual to arrive at his workplace—Pei Xuan's house.

Not only did his house provide clothes, it also provided a shower. Mu Gua took a lightning quick shower then changed into the servant's clothes that were left on the chair. Once he finished changing, he stood in front of the mirror to button up the buttons on his sleeves. At this moment, the door behind him opened and Pei Xuan stepped in.

"You acted very well yesterday." The man wearing gold-rimmed glasses appeared in front of Mu Gua in the mirror, he smiled. "You were a lot better than your sister. If only the two of you could swap personalities, that would save me a lot of trouble."

Mu Gua frantically turned around. "Boss."

"You can call me Brother Pei." Pei Xuan waved his hand, completely unconcerned. "Sit. That's right, does your sister scold you like this usually?"

Mu Gua stayed silent for a moment before answering, "No."

"I thought that was how she was usually." Pei Xuan shook his head. "I hired her to act as an obstinate mistress, not an unreasonable one, she's going overboard with her acting."

"She doesn't act like this usually..." Mu Gua said depressingly.

"What is she like usually?" Pei Xuan looked at him with curiosity, hoping to get more information on Ning Ning. Information from the person's relatives were important, it would let him find out Ning Ning's weaknesses, then he could formulate a plan accordingly.

"She is very gentle and she is very naggy. She would go along with anything I want and never say no to me..." Mu Gua lowered his head and looked at the mouthless mask. "So the things she says now...are most probably how she truly feels."

"Oh?" Pei Xuan cocked his eyebrows and looked at Mu Gua with interest.

"She thinks that I don't know her identity, that is why she would say those things to me. You think she was going overboard? I, on the other hand, think she's venting." Mu Gua smiled, he rubbed the mask with his thumb. "This is pretty nice. Why should she be like this mask and not say a word?" "Do you think she hates you?" Pei Xuan asked suddenly.

Mu Gua looked at him with surprise.

"...I don't know." He sighed a long time later, then put the mask on his face.

He also had a contract with Pei Xuan.

The contract was the opposite of what Ning Ning had.

Ning Ning would act as the mistress, he would act as the servant.

According to Pei Xuan's requirement, he had to pretend to not know about Ning Ning's true identity. He had to submit to her, serve her and make her happy.

Wasn't that how Ning Ning usually treated him?

"...She can scold me if she wants to, she can hit me if she wants to, I'm the reason she turned out this way anyway." Mu Gua said with the

mouthless mask on his face, "If she wants to be a sister, I will be her brother, if she wants to be a mistress, I will be her servant, she plays dual roles...I will do so too."

Chapter 83

83: The Beginning

"You stupid fatty."

"This is too boring, bring a watermelon, I want to play darts."

"There's no watermelon? Then stand there, don't move."

Ning Ning was holding a dart in her hand, she aimed it at him and counted, "One, two, three..."

Why are you not getting out of the way?!

"Five, six, seven...eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two..." The door opened when Ning Ning had no way to back down, Pei Xuan entered with a woman. She immediately hid the dart behind her like a little girl who had been caught red-handed pulling a prank. "You're here."

"It's time for your lesson." Pei Xuan introduced the woman behind him. "This is Teacher Li. She will be responsible for teaching you everything about etiquettes. You have to properly learn from her in the next two months."

The teacher was a woman in her thirties or forties, but she had aged well and still looked attractive.

Her appearance reminded Ning Ning of when she first met Lian Lian—she also had red lips, wearing a cheongsam and holding an opium pipe in her hand. You could say that Lian Lian had learned well from her teacher.

"Don't worry." She licked and moistened her lips. "I will teach her well."

A week later, Ning Ning knocked on the door to the study.

"Come in." Pei Xuan said.

The door opened and Ning Ning walked in, she said in a straightforward manner, "Did I hear that wrongly? You want me to act as the illegitimate daughter of a big boss, not the lover?"

There were a few bookshelves, they were filled with books, there were Chinese and foreign books, as well as picture albums, they emitted the unique scent of books.

There was no need to be afraid of a conman who could fight, but be afraid of a cultured one... Based on what Ning Ning could see, Pei Xuan was already quite a successful conman, what was scary was that this conman was continuously improving. He had begun to read foreign books, yet she could not recognise a single squiggle on the covers of his books?

No matter the language, she only hoped that his studies would be applicable practically, so that he would leave this land and her honest people as soon as possible. Going overseas to put his theories into practice...it would be best if he went somewhere in the middle east, if he dared to trick anyone they would teach him a lesson with an AK.

"What's the matter?" Pei Xuan closed the book and looked at her.

"Chest training, waist training, arms training, legs training..." Ning Ning tried to raise her arm...she had just finished practising and her arms were too sore to be raised. "...and walking training—including bare feet, high heels and slow walking...is this a modelling class?"

Pei Xuan pondered for a moment, then ordered the maid, "Help me bring Teacher Li over for a moment."

"You called for me?" Teacher Li arrived quickly.

"Let's change the training plan." Pei Xuan said, "There's not enough time. Reduce the time allotted for physical training, but teach her how to dress herself up. I don't wish for her to not know how to touch up her makeup after a meal."

"Understood." Teacher Li leaned at the side of Pei Xuan's chair, her right hand holding an opium pipe... After interacting with her for a few days, Ning Ning found out that Teacher Li did not smoke, she said that it would give her bad breaths. The opium pipe in her hand was but an accessory, it had the same use as her bracelets and handbags, they were there to go together with the clothes she was wearing. "What else do you want to add, or maybe you want to reduce other parts?"

"You are the professional, you decide." Pei Xuan said, "I just want to see a beauty that would make any man's eyes who sees her go wide by the end of the month."

"She can make any man's eyes go wide right now." Teacher Li said, "She can even make them stiff, the problem is that they would go limp the moment she speaks."

Pei Xuan and Ning Ning said in unison, "Can you be more civilised?"

"Oh, alright." Teacher Li stopped talking dirty, she put on the look of a lonely hero. "What I meant to say is, I want to fall asleep the moment she opens her mouth. Even if she were to wear a low-cut spaghetti strap, it would not prevent me from falling asleep. She is a big failure as a woman."

"You're not even a man." Ning Ning glared at her.

"No," Teacher Li suddenly switched to a man's voice and blandly said, "I am a man."

Ning Ning, "..."

A cross-dresser!

"Then let's add '*Three hundred golden sentences that would not let men fall asleep*', and '*One thousand topics to talk about when two persons meet*'.
" Pei Xuan smiled at Teacher Li, "Time waits for no man, begin."

"Alright." Teacher Li switched back to a female voice, charming and moving as he pulled Ning Ning away.

"Hey!" Ning Ning asked with her last gasp, "Are you really not grooming a lover for the big boss??"

Ning Ning was full of doubts over Pei Xuan which caused her usual attitude towards Mu Gua to worsen, but this fellow seemed to have awakened Mu Gua's masochistic side—he would not react no matter how much Ning Ning tortured him. It was not exactly that there was no reaction, the fellow seemed to be quite happy at times...

Ning Ning completely did not understand what he was happy about.

People say that it was impossible to make sense of an adolescent girl, Ning Ning felt that adolescent boys were the ones who were impossible to make sense of!

Adult men were also impossible to make sense of! Like Teacher Li who was in front of her.

"A woman who goes out without makeup is no different from a woman who goes out naked." Teacher Li slowly twisted the lipstick in his hand, "You have been going out naked for ten odd years already, it's time to wear some clothes."

Ning Ning, "..."

"As for the so-called '*Three hundred golden sentences that would not let men fall asleep*'...Sigh, there is no need for as many as three hundred sentences, you only have to remember three sentences." Teacher Li

twisted his waist, his eyes twinkling. "The first sentence: *Wow! You are so good!* The second sentence: *Can you teach me?* The third sentence: *Me no understand, you are so good!*"

Ning Ning, "..."

Was it too late to reincarnate as a man?

This abyss of misery—or you could say this hellish life—persisted for around a month. Ning Ning could not help but think about the consequences of breaching the contract after she remembered that this would persist for another month. It was then that Pei Xuan asked her, "How's the progress of your lessons?"

The three hundred golden sentences were reduced to three, even if it were only those three sentences, they were enough to make Ning Ning sick to the stomach. She did not really want to work for Pei Xuan anyway, thus she said accommodatingly, "It's going okay. I know how to do my makeup, three...three hundred golden sentences are also pretty much done."

"That's good." Pei Xuan said with a smile, "We will have a rehearsal tomorrow."

Ning Ning was surprised by what he said. "That quick? Am I not going to be acknowledged by him next month?"

"You are right." Pei Xuan pushed his gold-rimmed glasses up. "I have to give you a warm-up this month in preparation for next month."

The current date was November 1997.

It was the beginning of winter.

It had begun to snow, the white snow covered the ground, a small pair of red leather shoes walked on it, leaving behind a trail of footsteps.

Then they stopped in front of a car.

The car door opened and a man stepped out and stood in front of her. "Greetings, Young Lady."

Ning Ning's nose was slightly red from the cold. She looked up at Pei Xuan, her vision shifted to the reporters behind him, did they come on their own accord? Or did Pei Xuan invite them? Ning Ning guessed that it was the latter, be it the itinerary for the day, the timing for the meeting, the lines that they would read out, they were all prearranged. She thought that the reporters were no exception.

"Miss?" Ning Ning read out the lines that were prepared for her, "Did you get the wrong person?"

"I didn't get the wrong person." Pei Xuan took off his hat and smiled courteously at Ning Ning. "You are the granddaughter of the founder of Lian Company, a bonafide young lady."

Click, click, click. A number of cameras captured the moment.

Pei Xuan walked towards Ning Ning then used his hands to cover her, shouting with pretense, "No photos allowed!"

Ning Ning felt chills while she stood behind him.

This scene had her feeling a sense of *deja vu*.

The time and place where she had met Pei Xuan, the words he had said to her, his reactions and the actions he had taken were all recorded somewhere...

They were in Lian Lian's biography, < < Trial of the Witch > > .

This part where they were photographed was in the movie script. It was the beginning of the film, the beginning of everything.

The reporters swarmed them, they wished they could push their cameras up Ning Ning's face. Pei Xuan frantically pushed Ning Ning into the car, which then sped off amidst the reporters chasing and shouting. On the road, he tossed something at Ning Ning and smiled. "Great job."

"What is this?" Ning Ning asked with the box in her hands.

"Open it up and look." Pei Xuan said.

Ning Ning opened it up and saw that there was a pair of black gloves within.

"Next month." Pei Xuan turned the steering wheel. "Wear this to meet your family, Lian Lian."

The car stopped at an intersection. He did not send Ning Ning home directly, when Ning Ning got off the car, she had already changed out of her red coat and little red boots—those were work uniforms for her. Now that she was home, she changed back into her grey cotton-padded jacket and cotton shoes as she walked into the little area she currently lived in.

She first greeted the landlord who was taking out the trash at the entrance, then took out some money from her pocket. "This is the rent for the month and the money for taking care of my mother..."

"No need, no need." The landlord pushed Ning Ning's hand which was holding the money back. "Your brother has already given me the money today."

Ning Ning was stunned, she looked up and saw that the light in the house was light. The orange light was pouring out of the window, like a lighthouse that was pointing the way home.

She walked upstairs and opened the door with her key. Mu Gua's excited voice rang out from within, "You're back, I have a gift for you..."

He turned his head and saw the pair of black gloves in Ning Ning's hands.

He was busy turning around so he had nowhere to toss what he was holding, thus he stuffed it in his clothes for the moment.

"What gift do you have for me?" Ning Ning asked as she approached him.

"...I saw that eggs was on sale on the way back, so I bought some." Mu Gua looked up at her and smiled. "Let's have some fried rice for dinner tonight."

"Sure thing." Ning Ning walked into the kitchen after answering him.

"Sis." Mu Gua's voice rang out from behind her, "Who gave you this pair of gloves? They look like something of a superior grade."

"...I picked it up off the streets." Ning Ning said.

"Oh." Mu Gua answered, the sound of a door opening followed immediately after. "I'm going out for a while."

"Take out the trash while you're at it." Ning Ning said without turning her head as she beat the eggs.

Mu Gua took the trash bag out of the door. After he was done disposing the trash, he reached into his clothes again and took out a pair of white gloves. He hesitated for a long time until a voice rang out behind him. "You can give it to me if you are not going to throw it away."

Mu Gua quickly turned around and saw that Ning Ning had already been standing behind him for God knows how long.

She reached out and pulled on the pair of white gloves in his hands. Initially, he was unwilling to let go of them, Ning Ning crisply put her fingers in and looked up at him.

They looked at each other for a while before he let go in resignation. He said softly, "This pair is not even as good as the ones you picked up."

"But I like them." Ning Ning put her gloved hands on her face, she closed her eyes and smiled. "So warm."

Mu Gua slowly turned his head and looked at her.

Two similar faces were standing beneath the streetlight. The wind whirled, snow fluttered down by the streetlight, the world was sparkling and clear, just like a snowglobe. Ning Ning opened her eyes and looked at him, she suddenly reached out and put her hands on his face that was red from the cold and asked, "Is it warm?"

"...Yes." Mu Gua put both his hands into his pockets, he smiled as he closed his eyes. "It's warm."

Chapter 84

84: Funeral

Time flew by, the main thing was that the rumours spread very quickly.

Under the influence of money—ah no, under the influence of the newspaper fanning the flames, even the old man who sold deep-fried dough cake knew that Old Master Lian found his long-lost granddaughter—that was due to him using newspaper to wrap his dough cakes.

As the focal point of the rumour, Ning Ning finally ended her two month training. She reported to the Lian family along with Pei Xuan.

"Besides Old Master Lian, no one else would welcome you." Pei Xuan told Ning Ning on the way to the Lian Estate, "Old Master Lian has an ex-wife, a current wife, a lover, and a lot of grandchildren. The things that happen in his family are enough material for seven to eight seasons of drama, with every season spanning up to eighty episodes—that will increase to one hundred episodes when you are added in the mix."

The car stopped at the entrance of the Lian Estate. Ning Ning took a deep breath before she got off the car and entered the battlefield.

Although what Pei Xuan had said sounded more like a mockery, it was not completely baseless.

The chatter in the living room immediately stopped the moment she walked in. Everyone looked at her uniformly, no matter if it was men, women, adults or children. None of them had the expression of someone who was looking at a long lost relative, they had the expression of someone who was looking at a long lost enemy instead.

"She dares to claim to be Cheng Zhi's daughter when she doesn't look like him at all?"

"She looks witchlike."

"Who let her in? Chase her out!"

A middle-aged voice rang out among the commotion.

"It was Old Master Lian who invited her."

The commotion died down. The crowd looked towards the direction of the voice and saw a middle-aged man walking down the stairs. He was dressed smartly in a suit, solemn and slightly balding, holding a document in his hand.

"Lawyer Huang!"

"Lawyer Huang, how is my father?"

"I want to see my grandfather!"

A group of people immediately rushed up to him.

"My condolences." Lawyer Huang told them apologetically, "Mr Lian had just passed away. He had written a will before he passed away. Let me read it out to all of you."

The group of people immediately forgot about their husband or father, their eyes were locked onto the document he was holding.

"Mr Lian has decided that the shares of his company, his properties, his jewelries, his antiques..." Everyone took a deep breath as Lawyer Huang read up to this part—although they knew that it was a small possibility, they still held onto the hope that they would be the sole inheritor of the will. "will all be donated to the Hope Project. Every heir present will receive one hundred thousand dollars from his savings, the remainder will be donated to the Hope Project."

"What did you say??" The crowd started to complain loudly.

Old Master Lian's lover who had given birth to two of his children snatched the will out of Lawyer Huang's hand. She read it twice with gritted teeth then she sat on the ground as she covered her face and cried, "I gave the old man a son and a daughter, I gave him all ten years of my youth, now he wants to send me away with one hundred thousand dollars, sob sob sob..."

The house descended into chaos, Pei Xuan sighed as he turned and said to Ning Ning, "My apologies, I was not able to let you meet your grandfather for the last time."

The corner of Ning Ning's eyes twitched slightly.

Did she really arrive late and missed her chance to meet Old Master Lian for the last time?

This was not what was written in Lian Lian's biography.

At the same time, in Old Master Lian's bedroom.

The room was filled with the smell of medicine. An old man was

sitting on the bed, the arms extending out of his sleeves were skinnier than that of a girl's arms, it was like branches extending out of a tree.

Besides him, there was a woman—no, a man wearing a big white coat in the room.

Teacher Li was sweating profusely as he helped the old man put on the make up.

Ning Ning would have been shocked if she was here, because Teacher Li was not only not beautifying the old man's face, he was making him look more and more like a corpse.

The old man looked into the mirror and turned his head from side to side.

"Ah, Old Master Lian, don't move." Teacher Li said frantically.

"I say, Little Li." Old Master Lian looked at himself through the mirror in a picky manner. "I don't feel any different from how I usually feel, why don't you add some livor mortis on my face."

Teacher Li blurted out in exasperation, "A person who just died would not have livor mortis."

"It happens on television." Old Master Lian said.

"What show?" Teacher Li asked.

"< <Jiangshi Old Master> >." Old Master Lian looked at him suspiciously. "You did a great job on the makeup for that Old Master—you could tell that he was a dead person from one look, he even looked like he died a horrible death—why can't you do that for me?"

Teacher Li continued to talk in exasperation, "He is a *jiangshi*! How can a normal person who just died have a green face with fangs, spewing miasma from the mouth and have a face full of livor mortis??"

Teacher Li was a makeup artist, he provided his service to every big production crew most of the time. He excelled in putting on makeup for beautiful women, but he could also do different kinds of makeup, including jiangshi makeup. A talent was hard to come by, Old Master Lian asked a friend to get Teacher Li for him, he splashed money on him so that he would provide an on-site service.

He wanted Teacher Li to put on a makeup that made him look like someone who had just died.

"I don't care, make me look more desolate." Old Master Lian was still not satisfied, he tossed away the mirror in his hands and said, "I

currently look like someone who died peacefully on his bed, I can't scare anyone. "

Teacher Li felt that he completely didn't understand how a rich person thinks. Under the strong request of Old Master Lian, he had no choice but to make changes to Old Master Lian's makeup so that he would look like someone who died of sickness. As he put more powder on Old Master Lian he asked, "Why are you doing this? They are your wife and children, the people who are closest to you, why do you want to scare them?"

"I want to see who is actually the closest to me." Old Master Lian sighed deeply. "They call me their husband and father so passionately because I usually give them pocket money. Now I want to see, if they would still care for me and miss me if I don't give them any money... Are you really not adding livor mortis?"

"...I will add anything that needs to be added!" Teacher Li broke down.

Old Master Lian did not die an hour or two ago. According to the farce he had planned, he had at least died a night ago, or even up to a few days ago. With that, it was possible to add livor mortis on his face and body as he had wished.

As Teacher Li put on the finishing touches on Old Master Li, a flurry of footsteps rang out from outside his door. Lawyer Huang shouted to stop them, "Line up properly, we'll do this one at a time. Mr Li wrote in his will that everyone can have a one-to-one opportunity to bid him farewell... Doctor Li, are you ready?"

Teacher Li frantically put all his makeup brushes into a medical kit, hung a stethoscope on his ears, then put on a medical facemask and shouted at the door, "Ready".

The door opened. Lawyer Huang nodded to him so Teacher Li picked up the medical kit and walked out. There were only a few people left of the original crowd of wife and children who were in the living room.

"A few people immediately left after I read out the will." Lawyer Huang told Teacher Li. He seemed to be informing Teacher Li, but he was actually explaining everything that had happened to Old Master Lian who was behind the open door, "The people who have left are..."

"Lian Cheng Ren, Lian Cheng Li, Lian Mei Li, Lian Mei Xin..." Ning Ning read out a few names in her mind.

"Lian Cheng Ren, Lian Cheng Li, Lian Mei Li, Lian Mei Xin." Lawyer

Huang said.

As expected.

Ning Ning looked at the crowd of people in front of her with a complicated expression.

Because of a few consecutive accidents, she had thought that Lian Lian's biography was fake and that none of what was recorded in it was real. What was weird was that since Pei Xuan appeared, the things in the biography would—come true, why?

Suddenly, she understood.

"Lian Lian previously told me that anything regarding Pei Xuan—anything in the time period when she returned to the Lian family—was a blur to her, so she wrote them based on the accounts of the people around her, most of them from the servants." Ning Ning thought, "In other words, she could fake any other part of her biography except for things that happened in this time period—because her memories of this time period were based on the memories of others."

Who was the person whom Lian Lian saw as a servant? Based on Ning Ning's assumption, every person who provided service in this residence were all servants. Ning Ning first looked at Lawyer Huang, then looked at the female doctor beside him...She did not know if she was seeing things as she felt that the doctor looked a little familiar...

"Four people in total." After announcing the four names—in other words sentencing these four people to the death sentence in Old Master Lian's heart—Lawyer Huang looked at the remaining people and asked, "Which one of you wants to go in first?"

Ning Ning quickly shifted a vision to Old Master Lian's lover. As expected, she said in a deep voice, "I'll go first."

She quickly closed the door after she entered the room. The room had really good soundproofing, on top of that, her voice was very low, so the people outside could not hear what the people inside were talking about.

"Old man, I was with you for ten years." She sighed softly by the bed. "Although I knew that this day would come, my heart still has a hard time accepting this."

Old Master Lian laid on the bed and felt warmth in his heart. As expected of a person who had been by his side since her school years, a female student who had not been polluted by society would be

simple and single-minded...

"...Bastard! You only gave me one hundred thousand! Is there anyone who is that stingy?" His lover laughed coldly. "It's a good thing I was prepared. I have already hooked up with your friend the last time you brought me to the resort he owns. That's right, the two children I have are his. Did you think that you can impregnate anyone at this age?"

Old Master Lian felt a wave of sadness in his heart. He only had those children in the later years of his life, he used to dote on the son and daughter his lover gave him so much. Before he could get back to his senses, his eldest son had entered the room.

"Father, I hate you." He said coldly, "Mother sold her land and property so that you can have the money to start your business. The first thing you did after you made it was to get a new wife, then you started having children like rabbits, do you know, I have long decided that..."

...Hang on, why is the hand of a dead man warm?

The eldest son who had accidentally touched Old Master Lian's hand fell silent. To clarify his doubts, he slowly held Old Master Lian's hand. A few seconds later, he squeezed some tears out of his eyes and said painfully, "...I thought of a hundred ways to get back at you, but I couldn't use any of them, because you are my most beloved father!!"

He wailed for five whole minutes, he even felt faint from crying. Teacher Li had no choice but to go in and help him. He eventually left while he was still crying. The second son entered. Before the door could close, he started to point at the old man on the bed and berated him, "Even if you were to give the great me two hundred thousand, it wouldn't be enough for me to survive for a year! You chose to leave your money to outsiders instead of your own son, are your wires crossed..."

The people entered and left the room one at a time.

Lian Lian's biography used a term to describe this entire incident—a screening.

This was not a test of affection. It was a test of your eyesight, your intelligence and your adaptability instead. Only the bravest and the most meticulous people would be able to last till the end! The rest of the people would all lose their rights to inherit after this "funeral"!

The person beside her bumped her with their elbow.

Ning Ning came back to her senses and looked over. The last person from the Lian Family had walked out of the room. Lawyer Huang scanned the crowd before fixing his sight on her.

"It's your turn," he said, "go on in."

1A jiangshi, also known as a Chinese hopping vampire or hopping zombie, is a type of reanimated corpse in Chinese legends and folklore.

Chapter 85

85: Not a One Man Battle

The door closed behind Ning Ning.

She stood by the door, looking at the bed in front of her along with the old man on the bed. His eyes were firmly shut as he laid on a big pillow, a blanket covered him up to his waist, his fingers were interlocked with each other and were placed on his stomach. His sleeping posture was grand, like you could immediately move him into a coffin and bury him.

Ning Ning took a deep breath, she treated this as an audition.

The person on the bed was the interviewer.

The topic for the audition was < <Family Affection> >.

She, along with everyone in the Lian family, were all actors.

What she could foresee was that most of the people among the rest of the family did not pass the audition, but a few of them had used their sight, intelligence or maybe luck to pass this audition.

Ning Ning was the last person and also the person with the worst circumstances.

The others could beat their chest and stomp their feet, they could cry and wail, they could lament to Heaven and hit their head on the floor, they could even cry until they fainted in the toilet, but she could not. As a person who had never met the Old Master, as a person who was meeting him for the first time at his funeral, Ning Ning could not go overboard on her performance, that would be too fake. Maybe outsiders would go against their conscience and say that she was filial, but the interviewer would definitely grade her poorly.

What kind of a lukewarm method should she employ to interpret this topic?

Ning Ning walked step by step to the bedside. She looked down and sized up the old man on the bed, suddenly saying, "You look different from how I imagined you."

She looked at her surroundings before she pulled a chair over and sat on it. She didn't sit on the chair in the proper way, but in reverse

instead.

The back of the chair was facing the old man, she was straddling the chair. Her arms were crossed on the back of the chair, it was not ladylike or elegant at all, it looked like no one taught her manners, she looked like a wild child who did things without any restraints.

"I thought every rich man would be fat," Ning Ning told the old man on the bed, "why are you skinnier than me?"

The old man used to be fat and happy, but the doctor ordered him to go on a vegetarian diet, then he starved till he slimmed down. Old Master Lian answered in his mind, then pricked his ears up to continue to listen to what she had to say.

Yet, her voice disappeared for a full minute. Just when Old Master Lian thought she had quietly left, the sound of papers rustling rang out.

"The notes I have prepared earlier are going to go to waste." He heard Ning Ning say slowly, "First suitable topic to talk to grandfather about: *jiangshi* films. I have to highly recommend <<Old Master Jiangshi>>. Because, grandfather first of all loves *jiangshi* films, second of all loves old master films, the two genres combined would certainly please him. On the other hand, I have to heavily criticise <<Jiangshi Harem>>, because grandfather hates adult films..."

Who was it! Old Master Lian felt a surge of anger within him, who was the spy that was leaking information about this old man...?

"I don't need these anymore." Ning Ning said as she scrunched up the papers into a ball. Of course it was impossible for her to have notes, Pei Xuan had never told her about any of these, but the future was the era of the internet—a lot of secrets were not secrets anymore, including the fact that Old Master Lian was an experienced *jiangshi* fanatic...

Although it was hard listening to her reading off her notes, Old Master Lian felt even worse when she stopped reading. Because he was already dead, he could not even accommodate her even if he wanted to.

"...Honestly, I'm relieved." Ning Ning's voice rang out beside his ear, "I have never met you before, how would I even have any topics to talk to you about, you're a stranger to me."

Old Master Lian felt a wave of sadness upon hearing this.

She was not the only stranger in this house, there were even more

familiar strangers.

"...This family is completely different from what I have imagined, you are completely different from what I have imagined." Ning Ning's voice rang out again, it had a trace of confusion. "I thought all rich people live in bliss, but you are not blissful at all, why do they hate you so much?"

"I forgot that you cannot answer me."

"...Goodbye, grandfather..."

As she walked to the doorway, she suddenly looked back and said, "Don't be too sad."

The sound of the door closing rang out, Old Master Lian opened his eyes while still lying on the bed. He looked at the ceiling above him and did not say a word for a very long time.

It was when Teacher Li walked in that he slowly turned his head and looked at her. Old Master Lian asked him with a confused expression, "Why do they hate me so much?"

"I don't know why they hate you this much." Teacher Li raised his hand and pointed at his own nose. "All I wanted to tell you is that this spot is getting oily."

Old Master Lian, "!!!"

Half an hour later in the hall downstairs.

The hall which was filled with people standing around to the point where there was nowhere to sit previously was now a little empty, because there were a number of people who had left, angrily slamming the door after they had found out that they had only one hundred thousand dollars of inheritance. They did not even bother to go upstairs and take one last look at Old Master Lian.

There were even a few people who argued with Lawyer Huang in hope that they could get a bigger portion of the inheritance.

At this moment, Teacher Li came down the stairs.

She told everyone a piece of news—one they did not know whether to feel happy or sad about.

"Congratulations, everyone." Teacher Li wiped the sweat on his forehead. "After our best efforts to resuscitate him, Old Master Lian has come back to us."

The crowd, "..."

Eldest son, "Father!!!"

The eldest son immediately rushed upstairs. The rest of the people—not wanting to lose—rushed upstairs one by one as well.

Old Master Lian whom no one cared about just now had become a celebrity again. He only had two arms, his eldest son took one for himself, countless people grabbed the other arm, they fought for it while they shouted, "Get lost, this is my father!" "He is also my father!" "Unfilial children, you only have eyes for your father and not me your mother?"

This was truly a farce.

Old Master Lian's face turned pale. He seemed to be furious from how ugly everyone had looked, he started to have coughing fits. A bunch of hands wanted to help him gently hammer his back now, he coldly said, "Enough!"

A disappointed look washed across everyone's faces, Old Master Lian slowly said, "I did not die, I heard everything you all just said, cough, cough, cough..."

Although he did not die, from the looks of how he was coughing now, it seemed like he was about to die of anger stemming from the group of people in front of him.

"Lawyer Huang!" Old Master Lian shouted with what sounded like his last breath, "Quickly, come in quickly, I, I want to write up a new will!"

Lawyer Huang walked in frantically, then nodded to allow Teacher Li to stay before he told the rest of the people, "Can you all leave for a moment?"

"Who are you to tell me to leave!" The eldest son hugged Old Master Lian's arm firmly as if it was not an ordinary arm but an arm made out of gold.

"Leave." Old Master Lian ordered.

"Dad..." The eldest got up unwillingly and left.

Lawyer Huang locked the door after the crowd had left. He looked back and saw that Old Master Lian who had looked like his life was in danger was sitting up fiercely on the bed, patting his face with his hands depressingly. "This old face, this old face, why does it get oily so easily?"

The corners of Lawyer Huang's mouth twitched, "Mr Lian..."

"I'm afraid we would have to redo this one more time." Old Master Lian slowly turned his head around, he had a serious expression on his face, "My sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters are all very clever, if one of them were to discover any flaws, they would definitely try to beat me at my own game..."

At the same time in the wine cellar downstairs.

"I saw that grandfather's nose was oily." A young man swirled the bottle of wine he was holding, then poured the crimson liquid into a glass in front of him, "Thus I beat him at his own game, I hugged him and wailed."

"No wonder you are my son." The eldest son Lian Cheng Xin looked at the young man in front of him with gratification. He reached out and grabbed the wine glass that was filled with wine, but did not drink it, he told the young man sincerely and earnestly instead, "But now is not the time to celebrate victory. We have the advantage, now we have to maintain it, because we are definitely not the only ones who have seen through it..."

On the other hand, in Old Master Lian's room.

"I don't quite understand what you meant." Lawyer Huang asked, "What do you mean by redoing this one more time?"

"It means that I have to die one more time." Old Master Lian laughed coldly. "This time I will die from being angered by them, you will announce my new will after."

"I'm afraid they would not believe again.." Lawyer Huang said frankly.

"Then make them believe it!" Old Master Lian frothed at his mouth and glared with rage. "There is nothing in this world that cannot be solved with money. I'm responsible for paying, you're responsible for thinking of solutions, who cares if you have to borrow a corpse for me?!"

Then he turned his head and said to Teacher Li, "You have to make the corpse look like me."

Teacher Li said in exasperation, "I'm a makeup artist, not a face changer."

At the same time, in the garden downstairs.

The third daughter Lian Yuan Yuan avoided the rest of the people and sneakily made a phone call.

"I don't know what stupid tricks the old man is up to, but I know one thing—there is nothing in this world that cannot be solved with money." She said ferociously, "I'm responsible for paying, you are responsible for forming a brain trust. I will inform you of any situations, then you will let the brain trust think of solutions for me."

The person on the other end of the phone call laid out his price.

"Why is it so expensive!" Lian Yuan Yuan said angrily.

"Because your little brother just called and requested the same thing from me..." The other party answered.

"Turn him down! I will pay you twice what he's paying!!" Lian Yuan Yuan said.

Similar incidents happened in the different corners of the house. The "actors" who had passed the first round of auditions were diligently preparing for the second round of auditions. On the other hand, the only "interviewer" was also diligently preparing to make things difficult for them.

Compared to them, Ning Ning seemed to be slightly out of place.

She sat quietly at the sofa and looked out of the window, seemingly drifting off.

"...You don't look nervous at all." Pei Xuan's voice rang out from beside her.

She turned her head and saw him smiling as he stood beside her, holding a cup of coffee with each hand. He offered her one of the cups.

"What's there for me to be nervous about?" Ning Ning seemed to be smiling but not smiling at the same time.

Everything that was happening was happening in the order of what was recorded in the biography.

She knew that Old Master Lian was writing up a second will, she knew that Lian Cheng Xin and his son were drinking wine in the cellar, she knew that Lian Yuan Yuan and her little brother were making phone calls to form a brain trust, she knew everything that was about to happen.

But Pei Xuan seemed to have misunderstood what she meant.

"You don't care because none of these concerns you?" He took a sip of the coffee before he suddenly bent down and whispered into Ning Ning's ear, "Do you want to become the real Lian Lian?"

Ning Ning's eyebrows twitched. "What do you mean?"

"You have seen the person in the attic, she will never wake up again." Pei Xuan's voice was filled with temptation. "She cannot do anything even if you were to take anything from her."

Ning Ning stared at him.

...She knew a lot of things, but there was one thing she did not know.

Whether Mu Er, the girl she transmigrated as, agreed to this. The Lian Lian in the future—was she the vegetable in the attic, or was she Mu Er who was currently standing here now?

Chapter 86

86: Temptation

No matter what the future held, she was acting as Mu Er now. A small timid girl who had never experienced the world, who would do anything for money as long as it didn't betray her conscience.

"...I can't." Ning Ning rubbed her hair irritably. "I'm scared..."

"What are you scared of?" Pei Xuan said with a smile, "No risk, no reward. If you were to work normally, you would need to wash dishes for ten years before you could afford the leather boots you are wearing right now. If you were to work starting from the republic years until now, then you would be able to afford the house you are looking at now..."

"...That doesn't seem to be the case?" Ning Ning scanned her surroundings, looking at every inch and corner. The Lian family members who were scattered around looked back at her with caution. She lowered her voice and said, "Do you see them? With this many people, I would at most get the toilet out of the (whole) inheritance."

Pei Xuan sneered with disdain. "There are not more than five of them who could go up against you...why did you think Old Master Lian invited them over?"

Ning Ning looked at him doubtfully. She had a very bad feeling about this.

"Old Master Lian pretended to die," Pei Xuan said, "even the will was fake. The reason he did that was to test his wife and children, to see if they loved him or his money. You saw the results, most of the people did not pass the test."

Ning Ning could not help but widen her eyes as she pointed at him. "You...you..."

"That's right, it was me." Pei Xuan's smile had a trace of pride. "The person who gave Old Master Lian the idea was me."

...You actually thought up such a lousy idea, don't tell me you are essentially a jerk?

Pei Xuan was of course a jerk.

He first got himself acquainted with the second son of the Lian family. The two of them once had quite a good relationship, else this playboy would not have agreed to acknowledge the illegitimate daughter he had outside—one had to know that she was not only an illegitimate daughter, she was the first one to be acknowledged into the family. In this period, Pei Xuan also got to know Old Master Lian through him. He then spent a period of time forging a friendship between generations. One day, Old Master Lian lamented that everyone beside him would say nice things while he was alive, he would not know what they would say after he had died.

"If you are interested in finding out," Pei Xuan took advantage of the opportunity to mention it, "I have a solution."

That was finally the end of the blockbuster show for the day.

But the show was not over, Old Master Lian was planning for season two of < >, all the leading actors and the actors that had failed the audition were given a little bit of a break as they were allowed to return to their homes.

On the way back, a man stood in front of Pei Xuan's car to block him. After stepping on the brakes in time, the pale white headlights shone on the man, illuminating his face that was flushed from alcohol. His facial features were very similar to that of Lian Lian's. He was a typical handsome man, and now his handsome face was twisted with rage. He hammered both his fists on the car and said in fury, "Pei Xuan, bitch, get out of the car this instant!"

"What's the matter, second young master?" Pei Xuan winded down the window.

"You're asking me what's the matter?" The other party walked quickly to the window. He reached in and grabbed Pei Xuan's collar. "What exactly happened today? Did the old man pretend to die? Was that deliberate? Was he...was he using it to test us?"

"Why are you asking me if you've seen through it?" Pei Xuan looked at him innocently.

The second son shuddered, fear slowly appearing on his face. "Then, then, what do I do?"

He was done for.

Ning Ning looked at him with pity. The rest of the people didn't have it as bad, at least they had spoken behind closed doors. This guy was the only person who had shouted with the door open...

"About that, you did...sigh." Pei Xuan had nothing to say to him. "Even if you wanted to shout, you should have at least closed the door before you did it, ah...What's done cannot be undone. Unless you could prove that you were possessed, the old man would hate you for the rest of his life."

"Now is not the time for sarcastic remarks!" The second son was enraged. He reached his hand into the car, seeming like he wanted to open the door and drag Pei Xuan out so that he could beat him up. Both his eyes were red, he said breathlessly, "Don't think you will be fine if it doesn't go well for me...and you!"

Those red eyes looked towards Ning Ning, laughing coldly. "If me as your father is finished, you as the cheap daughter would also be finished."

Pei Xuan suddenly opened the door with force. The door had banged onto the second son, he shouted and stumbled onto the snowy ground.

"You're finished, she's not." Pei Xuan closed the door, smiling at the second son who was like an outcast. "Let's make a bet, in the second will the old man would write up, there would probably not be your name, but it definitely would have hers."

"That's bullshit!" The second son quickly got up from the ground, but was greeted with a faceful of exhaust fumes. He gave chase for a few steps in anger, but in the end his legs could not outrun the wheels, he could only grab a handful of snow from the ground and helplessly threw it at the car that was getting further and further away.

There was a pair of eyes which stared at him from the car until his figure slowly disappeared into the night. She turned her head back and asked Pei Xuan with a complicated expression, "Was he your friend?"

"A bad friend."

Ning Ning fell silent for a moment before asking, "Is he Lian Lian's father?"

"Yes."

"...You could have told him." Ning Ning looked at the side profile of Pei Xuan. "If you had told him that this was a test, at least he would not have shouted with the door open."

"He is an idiot, I have never and will never work with idiots," Pei Xuan said, "because idiots cannot be controlled—they cannot be

controlled by others, they also cannot control myself. I will never know what his next step will be, maybe it would be shouting with the door open, or maybe doing CPR with the door closed."

Ning Ning blinked her eyes, "You did not tell me beforehand as well, is it because I am an idiot in your eyes too?"

"...Not now." Pei Xuan looked into her eyes deeply. "You can trick the old man, you might even be able to trick me in the future. You are a clever person, I am willing to work with you."

Ning Ning fell silent.

Before Old Master Lian chased them off, he summoned them once again. This time, he did not summon all of them, he only summoned a portion of the people. Pei Xuan was right again. Including Ning Ning, there were exactly five of them. It didn't take much to figure out that these five were the victors of the current audition and the leading actors for < > season two.

Ning Ning asked, "What do you want?"

In Lian Lian's biography, the most important missing piece was Pei Xuan. He clearly had a huge influence on this incident. One could even say that he was the main instigator of the whole incident, but for some reason his existence was faint, or even wiped out—intentionally or not. Why?

Ning Ning did not believe that Pei Xuan would help anyone without expecting anything in return at all. He had a motive for everything he did—making use of his friend to get to know the Old Master, making use of Old Master Lian to conduct this test, what was next? What was he trying to use her for?

"...There's no need to rush." Pei Xuan slowly said as he drove, "First, I will give you a new name, a new identity, then we will talk about the future."

Half an hour later in the rented apartment.

The door opened quietly, Ning Ning who had switched back into her regular outfit tiptoed into the apartment. Just as she was bending down to take off her shoes, the lights above her head were turned on.

Mu Gua stood by the wall, his finger was still on the light switch, looking down at her. "Why are you home so late?"

Chapter 87

87: Truth of the Awakened

"...Overtime." Ning Ning took out a stack of money from her bag and handed it to him. "They are paying me for it."

Mu Gua leaned on the wall with his arms folded. He looked at the money in her hand with a cold and bland expression, then suddenly turned around and walked towards the room. His footsteps were heavy—very heavy, very quick—they sounded like a drum, each step was more frantic than the one before.

Crash—What fell to the floor?

Ning Ning kicked off her shoes and followed the noise.

She stood at the doorway to the room and watched as Mu Gua turned around. He was holding an overturned schoolbag in his hands, coins and notes fell out like water flowing out of a bottle, pouring down and covering the floor.

"Is that enough?" He looked up at her.

Ning Ning suddenly felt angry from the cold expression he had as he was looking at her.

"Enough?" She laughed coldly and walked over, reaching her foot out and divided a portion of the money. "This is your school fees."

She divided another portion. "This is for your meals."

"This is for your rent."

"This is for your clothes and shoes."

...

After she finished dividing the last portion, she patted the empty floor with her foot and laughed coldly as she folded her arms. "This amount of money is not even enough for yourself. Enough? Is that enough to provide for mom and me?"

Mu Gua's face turned pale.

"...But you cannot do this." He struggled to form a sentence. "You quit your original job long ago, these couldn't be money from washing dishes..."

Ning Ning gripped the money in her hands firmly, smiling out of anger. "How do you think I got all this money? What do you think...I am doing outside?"

There was an instant when she wanted to throw the money in her hands in his face, but she had held them for too long and had used up all her strength gripping on them, thus she fell and sat on the bed. A few notes had floated out of her hands, she covered her face with her hands. "You think I like to slog my guts out for another person? The weather is so cold. I don't want to wash the dishes, I don't want to say 'welcome' to please the customers, I don't want to come back late into the night to earn overtime pay outside at all..."

In the movies, the frostbites were just makeup effects, but here, they really hurt.

"...I'm a girl." Her frostbitten hands that covered her face trembled slightly. "I am ruining myself now, what would I do when I get old? After I grow old, I would not be pretty anymore. I'm not cultured, when I don't even have the strength to do labour, what would I do...? I have never thought of that."

She suddenly put her hands down and looked at Mu Gua with teary eyes. "I was thinking about you."

Mu Gua felt like he was punched. He stood on the spot awkwardly.

He took a step forward after a while. He raised both his arms slightly, looking like he wanted to give her a hug, but Ning Ning reached out and pushed him back.

"Sis..." Mu Gua looked at her, feeling hurt.

"...Don't touch me." Ning Ning lowered her head.

Right after she said those words, Ning Ning suddenly realised that, as an elder sister, as Mu Er, she had loved and hated Mu Gua. He was younger than her, weaker than her, he needed her. That was why, when something had happened to the family, it was natural for her as an elder sister to shoulder all the responsibilities, to take care of his needs and lodgings, to earn money to pay for his school fees—she also had to put up with his unreasonable bad temper.

He had burdened her, tied her down, and trapped her. Ning Ning suddenly looked up at her surroundings. Such a small, dirty and cold room, she had been staying here for the sake of saving money, she could even hear mice running across the floor after she switched off the lights. She had to endure her nights here even though she clearly had money on hand...

Ning Ning shivered and looked at the money on the ground.

"Take it, this is overtime pay. Too much? Heh heh, it's not much—wait till you become the young lady of the Lian family, then it would be your turn to give me a tip."

Ning Ning let out a bitter laugh, she knew why Pei Xuan gave her this overtime pay now.

This man was a partner to the thing called desire. What was scary was that lying was not what he was best at—it was the ability to pry open a gap in a person's heart, after which he would softly sing an evil song to lure the desire to peek out its head from inside, just like a snake.

Afterall, everyone had two sides—and he was good at luring out the dark side of a person...

A few days later at the Lian house.

Her family and career seemed to be like an eternal love rival, whenever one did well, the other would flounder. Ning Ning's family was in a mess, on the other hand, she performed really well at the Lian family.

"You're no daughter of mine." The second son said coldly.

"You're no son of mine." An even colder voice rang out from behind him.

The second son turned around and shouted at Old Master Lian who was lying on the bed, "Father!"

"Get out." Old Master Lian said curtly.

The second son originally wanted to make a scene and not leave, but he was dragged out by Old Master Lian's security. Old Master Lian waved for Ning Ning to approach him after the second son had left. He looked at her with a kind and pleasant countenance. "Child, tell me about yourself."

Her character specifications were set long ago. Ning Ning sat in front of him, neither near nor far. She glanced at him occasionally, but she played with the corner of her top most of the time. "Me? I live with my mother, but I don't even know if she is my biological mother, because she doesn't like me one bit, she only likes my brother."

"Favouring sons over daughters, there are a lot of people like that." Old Master Lian asked another question, "Did you go to school?"

"I did, but I'm currently not attending school." Ning Ning said

without expression, "My mom said that girls don't need to study too much, we get married off anyway, then we will raise kids at home."

"Do you hate them?" Old Master Lian asked.

Ning Ning glanced at him with surprise, he seemed to have hit the nail on the head. She frowned for a very long time before she shook her head and said, "Out of the question, they are my family after all."

"That's right, out of the question." Old Master Lian sighed again. He looked straight at the ceiling above him. He had felt lost for a long while before he looked at Ning Ning and said, "Say 'Grandpa'."

Ning Ning, "Grandpa?"

"Yes." Old Master Lian patted her hand and smiled. "Grandpa will send you to school. I will send you to whichever school you like, you won't have to get married off after you graduate, a man can also marry into a woman's family in this world..."

"Stop, stop, stop!" Ning Ning said stop continuously, then looked at him with some excitement as she could not sit still. She asked carefully, "Grandpa, do you treat everyone in this family...this well?"

Old Master Lian's eyes had a flash of a shadow. He smiled a little blandly. "Of course, I treat everyone equally well, equally well..."

Humans were close and distant to others at different times. Even if it was a family of three or four, there were times where it would be difficult to be fair, what about Old Master Lian? He was unable to be fair to everyone right now, it was even more so in the past.

Old Master Lian became absent-minded after answering the question. He talked a bit more to Ning Ning about her life before he smiled and gave a look to Lawyer Huang who was beside him. Lawyer Huang immediately told Ning Ning, "Mr Lian is a little tired, let's stop here for today, let him rest."

Ning Ning smiled as she stood up, "Goodbye, Grandpa. Rest well."

The door closed firmly behind her. She knew that they wanted to discuss matters of the second audition. Old Master Lian was tired? No, he was not tired at all. Before he could find the relative who was closest to him, he would continue to be restless, just like the group of people downstairs.

Ning Ning walked down the stairs step by step. She looked at the people downstairs, the people downstairs looked back at her. They did not have the look of someone looking at their relative, they had the look of someone looking at their opponent instead.

Old Master Lian longed for family affection, but he had turned it into a battle. Since it was a battle, it was bound to be bloody and cruel, it was destined to have winners and losers. If one were to look for affection from this, they would be destined to gain none.

"How did it go?" Pei Xuan's voice rang out from the side.

Ning Ning turned her head to look at him, she thought: It was this person, he lured out the dark side of Old Master Lian, making him long for affection but not believing in it.

"The old man said he wants to send me to school." Ning Ning said.

Pei Xuan exclaimed, he seemed to be smiling. "I didn't expect you to be good at pleasing middle-aged people and the elderly."

"I only know how to please the elderly." Ning Ning corrected him.

"You also pleased me." Pei Xuan put a cigarette into his mouth. "I am a middle-aged person."

The corner of Ning Ning's mouth twitched, she felt like vomiting.

Looking at this person hurt her eyes too much, Ning Ning frantically shifted her vision to the people in the living room. They were either in groups of three or four, or brought a huge brain trust. She suddenly exclaimed, "Why is a person missing?"

Ning Ning questioned even though she had already known the answer. According to the records of Lian Lian's biography, although five people were invited today, only four people would show up—the eldest son with his son, the third daughter and Ning Ning. The fourth son would not come because he would meet an accident along the way...

"Who knows." Pei Xuan touched on it lightly by her side. "Maybe he met with an accident along the way."

As his voice trailed out, a person rushed in from outside, shouting fervently at the crowd, "It's terrible! Something happened to the fourth young master!"

Ning Ning immediately shifted her sight to Pei Xuan.

She knew this would happen because she had read the autobiography. What about him? How did he know?

At the same time, at Pei Xuan's house.

Mu Gua was sitting on a chair in the living room, a book was placed on his knees, but he did not flip a page for a long time.

He finally closed the book out of frustration. He looked up and scanned his surroundings before wondering, "Where did everyone go?"

There were usually many people at Pei Xuan's house, they were namely his chef, gardener and butler—but Mu Gua felt that those were not their actual occupations. Because, there was no real chef who could not even make a proper fried rice; a real gardener who could not differentiate a rose and a China rose; or a butler who could not properly brew tea.

Those people were not around today, it was only him and a fat maid.

The maid let him stay downstairs while she stayed upstairs. What was upstairs? Mu Gua who had never been upstairs didn't know.

A loud konk rang out from upstairs.

Mu Gua jumped at the sound. He looked up. Just as he was considering whether he should go up or not, a frantic set of footsteps rang out.

A figure wearing a white nightgown appeared at the top of the stairs. She was still holding a hammer stained with blood. She was shocked the moment she saw Mu Gua, then raised the hammer with both her hands and aimed it at him. There was still blood dripping from the hammer, she shivered as she said, "Let me go!"

Mu Gua looked at her with surprise. He suddenly took off his mask and took a step towards her. "Sis, what's wrong? Why do you look like this?"

The girl in the white nightgown who looked exactly like Ning Ning took a step back in fear.

Mu Gua stopped in his tracks abruptly. He examined her with doubt, then slowly retreated and said, "No, you are not my sister."

He retreated to the side of the table in the living room. On the table was a fruit platter, he conveniently picked up the fruit knife that was stuck in a fruit... He flicked the fruit on the knife off to the ground and pointed the tip of the knife at the other party.

The girl in the white gown swallowed her saliva. Although both of them were armed, Mu Gua was a boy and she was a girl, he also looked physically strong while she was frail, she could not get physical with him.

"What happened to Auntie Li?" Mu Gua had seen the blood on her hammer, he coldly asked, "Did you kill her?"

Auntie Li was the fat maid. The girl in the white gown was shocked, frantically shaking her head. "I did not kill her, I only knocked her out, I had no choice either... Hold on, sister? Do you have a sister who looks exactly like me? You are her brother?"

Mu Gua's eyebrows twitched, "So what if it is?"

The girl in the white gown suddenly laughed out loud.

Her laugh annoyed Mu Gua. He took another step towards her again and asked coldly, "What are you laughing about?"

"I am an actress." The girl in white gown stopped smiling and told him, "One day, Pei Xuan found me and told me that I looked like the illegitimate daughter of a rich family who had died from an accident. He had paid me to act as her. "

Mu Gua understood a lot after hearing what she had said. For example, why Pei Xuan looked for his sister then dressed her up beautifully, it made him misunderstand that they were...

"Then I also accidentally met up with an accident. I was run over by a car and had turned into a vegetable." The girl in the white gown said, "That was when he approached your sister, because your sister looked exactly like me. Ha, I'm guessing that he said this, 'No risk no reward, if you were to work normally, you would need to wash dishes for ten years before you can afford the leather boots you are wearing right now', 'If you were to work starting from the republic years until now, then you would be able to afford this house', 'As long as you nod now, all of these will belong to you'..."

"I don't get it." Mu Gua furrowed his brows. "Why do you want to run away from something that good?"

The girl in white gown fell silent for a moment before she said, "Because he lied to me."

Mu Gua, "...What do you mean?"

"...I woke up a month ago." The girl in white gown seemed to have remembered something scary as her lips trembled. "At that time, I was dead in Pei Xuan's eyes. There are a lot of things he would not say to a living person, which he would to a dead one..."

This matter implicated his sister, Mu Gua urged, "What did he say?"

"I heard too much, so much so that I did not even dare to open my eyes, I could only continue to pretend to be a vegetable." The girl in white gown slowly said, "Especially after I heard that even though he sought me out, he did not intend for me to be a living Lian family

mistress, but a dead Lian family mistress..."

There was a buzz in Mu Gua's head, he shook his head. "How can that be..."

"Do you not understand?!" The girl in white gown screamed at him, venting the fear and rage in her heart, "He looked for people to groom us, teaching us how to be pretty in front of the camera, it was all for when we die at the Lian house, so that we would have a good-looking photo to be published on the newspaper, the headline would be--"

Once she had said what the headline would be, Mu Gua did not stay in the room any longer, he rushed out of the entrance of the villa.

In the living room of Lian Estate.

"What? He was detained at the police station?"

"He was reported? He had killed someone with his car? Is that true?"

"Wait a minute, I remember now, something like that seemed to have happened, but wasn't it kept under wraps? Who disclosed it?"

Everyone broke out in a flurry of discussions, but they were just talks, no one was willing to step up to bail him. Some of them were happy that misfortune fell upon him instead.

Ning Ning could not help but frown upon looking at what was happening.

Something was fishy...

This didn't happen before or after, it had to happen at this crucial juncture of time, it seemed like someone had a hand in it no matter how she looked at it.

"To us, it's a good thing." Pei Xuan smiled at her gently from her side. "We have one less opponent, am I right?"

Chapter 88

88: Come Find Me

Just as Pei Xuan's voice trailed out, his mobile phone rang.

"Hello" Pei Xuan answered the phone.

"Let my sister go." Mu Gua's cold voice rang out from the other end, "Otherwise, I will bring the girl from the attic to where you are now."

Pei Xuan was stunned, then he said while looking calm, "I'm sorry, my surname is not Zhang, you got the wrong number."

He hung up, but the phone quickly rang again.

"Looks like you're a busy man." Ning Ning stared at him.

"Apologies, let me handle this." Pei Xuan smiled impatiently at her, then went into the washroom without so much as a by your leave. Just as he entered, the phone stopped its ringing. He looked at his surroundings for a moment, seeing that there was no one around, he immediately called someone.

Police station.

The crew-cut man was getting his statement taken, he was making a report about how the fourth son of the Lian family had killed someone with his car and had absconded a few years ago.

Suddenly, his mobile phone rang. He smiled at the policeman. "I'm sorry, it's probably my father, can I go take this call?"

"Be done with it and come back quickly." The policeman said.

The person who provided for you could also be regarded as a parent, Crew-cut Man—in other words, Pei Xuan's lackey—quickly found a place to answer the phone. "Hello, Brother Pei, what's up?"

"Mu Gua has brought Lian Lian away." Pei Xuan said in a straightforward manner.

"What?" Crew-cut Man was so shocked that he almost jumped up. "Then do I have to report it to the police?"

"...Get a few men to circle around the phone booths nearby the Lian Estate, and also shops that have public phones." Pei Xuan said blandly, "I think he should already be nearby, but he cannot come in, that's

why he is coming after me by calling me. "

"Ok, I will immediately arrange for the manpower." Crew-cut Man answered.

He frantically called a few other people after he hung up. If Mu Gua was here, they would definitely be able to recognise him with a glance.

The few people (he called) were the chef, the gardener and the butler respectively. Originally, they had their own duties. For example, the crew-cut man was responsible for making a report on the fourth son of the Lian family, but faced with this sudden situation, one of them asked with doubt, "Looking for a person? Now? What about Brother Pei's original arrangement?"

"Listen to Brother Pei. Look for the boy first, we can talk about the other things later." The crew-cut man said unpleasantly.

The few of them stared at each other, then stopped what they were doing and started to look for Mu Gua around Lian Estate.

On the other side, after Pei Xuan hung up, he came out of the washroom and returned to sit beside Ning Ning.

"How is it?" He asked quietly, "Did anything important happen while I was gone?"

"The old man told someone to inform us that we should stay for the afternoon to have a family lunch together." Ning Ning answered while being distracted as she recounted the plot for this part.

In the biography, in the script, the next part was titled < <Poison> > .

Old Master Lian did not allow any outsiders to participate because it was a family feast, no matter if it was the brain trust or their confidants, they were all chased off.

The family feast would only have him and his four successors.

Even the servants were given temporary holidays, a chef that had been hired for many years was the only one who was left behind, an old chef that was a little obtuse.

The four successors were each ordered to take something from the kitchen in turns. They would then witness a scene where the old chef 'added poison'. According to the different personalities of the successor in the kitchen, the old chef would have different reasonings and targets to 'poison'. All of them would get two chances to correct the

old chef's mistake—once in the kitchen, once at the dinner table.

Old Master Lian was going crazy over his test for affection.

This time he wanted to know if, for the sake of the inheritance, they would sit by and just watch as another successor—watch as their own son, sibling, niece, even their father—consume poison.

There was a commotion in front. The third daughter's scream rang out, "Those are my friends, how can you chase them off?"

"Mr Lian said, this is a family feast, outsiders are not allowed to participate." Lawyer Huang said with a professional tone, "You can either stay or leave together with them."

"It has begun." Ning Ning thought.

At this moment, a mobile phone beside her rang.

She turned her head to look at the other party, Pei Xuan, who stood up and said, "Apologies, I need to take another call."

In the washroom.

"Brother Pei, we have searched every phone booth and shop along with any other places that have a public phone, but we have not found him." The crew-cut man asked, "What do we do now? Do I tell them to continue searching, or..."

Pei Xuan tsk-ed, "Forget it, tell them to stop searching. Go back to the original plan for now...Give me a minute, someone is here."

Just as he hung up, a person entered the washroom behind him. The person leapt onto Pei Xuan just as he turned around, forcing him to take two steps back and hit his back on the wall.

"Have you gone mad?" Pei Xuan said in a low voice.

"You have to help me, you said you would!" The third daughter, Lian Yuan Yuan, wrapped her arms around his waist as she frantically and angrily spoke out.

Pei Xuan hurriedly walked over to the door and locked it, then looked down at Lian Yuan Yuan who still wasn't letting go and said, "I will definitely help you, but let's talk somewhere else, shall we? If the two of us were to be seen like this, we wouldn't be able to explain ourselves."

"The two of us have been dubious for a long time, why would you be afraid of people gossiping?" Lian Yuan Yuan rebuked, "Quickly help me deal with the few other people, secure the old man's inheritance,

then we can sign the marriage certificate and split the stuff in half."

This insatiably avaricious and vain woman would actually split it in half with him? Pei Xuan smiled. He knew that she was lying, but it didn't matter, he had a way to force her to keep her word.

But on the surface he consoled her with tender affection, "Don't worry, everything is going to plan, everything will be yours...alright, take it out."

He reached a hand out to Lian Yuan Yuan.

Lian Yuan Yuan hesitated before opening her handbag, taking out a bottle of eyedrops from inside, but she still held onto it tightly and was unwilling to hand it over to him.

"Are there no other ways?" Lian Yuan Yuan hemmed and hawed, "My eldest brother is a very vigilant person, he has never eaten anything carelessly, he has a lot of friends too. If anything were to happen to him, those friends would come out..."

"Who said I wanted to kill him with poison?" Pei Xuan smiled.

Lian Yuan Yuan was taken aback. "Then..."

"Lian Lian." Pei Xuan spat out a name.

"Why her?" Lian Yuan Yuan covered her mouth in shock, then had a look of chagrin. "What's the use of poisoning her? She is but an illegitimate daughter who has never spent time with the old man. How much could the old man like her? She is no match for me at all. She's only something that is not loved while alive and no one would care even if she's dead..."

"That's why she's the most suitable to die." Pei Xuan said coldly, "After she dies, someone or some newspaper would naturally hint that she could have been killed by another successor. Logically speaking, this person would definitely have wanted to deprive her of her inheritance. Who is this person? Some people would say that it was your eldest brother. He would definitely refute, he might even want to look for the truth, but Lian Lian would have already turned into ash by then, he would not be able to find anything."

Lian Yuan Yuan felt ecstatic listening to him. Her doubts were mostly alleviated, the only remaining trace was the only thing bothering her. "Will things really go that smoothly?"

"That would be a matter between your eldest brother and I, you don't have to worry about it." Pei Xuan smiled blandly, he exuded a criminal sense of pride, brimming with confidence, it was as if he had

everything held under his palms.

This smile lasted for three seconds.

Three seconds later, his mobile phone rang again.

He frowned slightly and told Lian Yuan Yuan, "I need to take this call, you can leave now...Don't smile, act like you are angry. That's right, this is pretty good, let the people outside think you've failed in seducing me."

Pei Xuan answered the phone after sending Lian Yuan Yuan away.

"Are you looking for me?" Mu Gua asked.

Pei Xuan narrowed his eyes. "What do you want?"

"I want to tell you one thing." Mu Gua said, "Lian Lian—and I mean the real Lian Lian—has woken up. She had woken up long ago, she had heard everything you told her, she had also remembered all of it. She is currently by my side, I can bring her to the police anytime."

Pei Xuan stayed silent, rooted on the spot for a few seconds before he started to smile through gritted teeth. It felt like a demon had torn through its disguise, his ferocious smile was reflected in the mirror in front of him. "No, she is not there. If she was really by your side, you would have gone to the police long ago, you would not have wasted your time calling me at all."

Mu Gua, "..."

"Little boy, let me take a guess at which part of what you said was true." This demon said slowly and methodically, "She's awake, of course she's awake. I had been wondering how long she could pretend to be a vegetable for, and for that I had been talking to her whenever I had the time to. I told her what I originally wanted to do to her—like killing her, burning her."

Mu Gua, "..."

"Did she say exactly what I told you? Saying that I would kill your sister, burn your sister." Pei Xuan said, "You are very rash, of course you would immediately run out to look for me, but you do not know where I am, thus you went back to look for Lian Lian. You want to ask her where the Lian Estate is, but unfortunately, you could not find her anymore as she has already run away."

Mu Gua, "..."

"Now you are out of ideas, you could only harass me by continuously calling me." Pei Xuan started to smile. "But what's the

use of that?"

"...How much do you think I know?" Mu Gua asked abruptly after falling silent for a moment, "How much do you think she told me?"

The smile of Pei Xuan's face slowly faded away.

"She told me everything about the Lian family." Mu Gua took two deep breaths. "So it doesn't matter even if she ran, I wouldn't run. If I could not find you, I would go to the police, the press, I would tell them everything I know. I would tell them that the illegitimate daughter of the Lian family is fake, that her real name is Mu Er, that her family operates an eatery, that she is sixteen this year, that her primary school is..."

"No one would believe you." Pei Xuan interrupted him.

"They would believe me when my sister is dead." Mu Gua's voice suddenly increased in pitch. "The people you have implicated would definitely look for me! I am the witness, I am the evidence!"

"You said it yourself," Pei Xuan's voice was very calm, he said word by word, "when your sister is dead."

The other end fell silent.

What was the use of a witness, an evidence, the truth? Would they be able to be used to exchange for a living sister?

Within the phone booth, Mu Gua was breathing heavily, he was sweating buckets despite it being winter, it made passerbys stare at him.

"Across your house, across my house and the entrance of the police station." Mu Gua suddenly said, "Come look for me in these three places."

"Be clear about it, what exactly do you want?" Pei Xuan asked.

"I won't tell you." Mu Gua let out a cold laugh. "You make your lackeys do everything, even when you commit crimes. I don't care what you want to do to my sister, stop whatever it is. Let your lackeys come look for me!"

Chapter 89

89: Outsider

Old Master Lian stood by the window, he could see the entrance from his position.

A group of people walked out of the entrance. The weather was very cold, they entered the cars very quickly, but did not drive off, remaining stationary on the snowy ground. The roof of the cars had long been covered in snow, they looked like white pillboxes.¹

"Look." Old Master Lian looked at them through a lit up window while sitting on a wheelchair, he laughed, "Don't they look like parents waiting for their children to come out of the school after they have collected their results for their college entrance examination?"

Then he turned his head around and smiled at the crowd behind him, "Alright, the outsiders have left, let us begin."

The family feast began.

The long dining table was seated with only a few people. The crowd looked at each other, but in the end, Ning Ning was the first to speak up, "What does everyone want to eat? I will go into the kitchen and make it."

"You don't have to trouble yourself." Old Master Lian looked towards the entrance. "Look, he's here."

An elderly chef walked in from the entrance, holding a bowl of seafood soup in his hands. He seemed to have a little limp, by the time he got to the table, the bowl of soup in his hands had only half of its contents left, the other half had been spilled on the floor.

As he walked past Lian Yuan Yuan, his hands suddenly trembled.

"Ah!" Lian Yuan Yuan shouted loudly and jumped out of her seat, but she was still unable to dodge it, the soup was spilt on her dress. She picked a prawn off her dress and shouted with a face of disgust, "Father, why do you keep him?! His hands tremble as if he has Parkinson's, just let him retire already!"

The cowardly old chef did not dare to speak.

"Don't say that, he's just old." Old Master Lian looked at Ning Ning.

"Lian Lian, go help him out."

"Ok." Ning Ning got up frantically and walked over.

The two of them walked into the kitchen together once they had cleaned the table. The journey to the kitchen was very desolate, not only did Old Master Lian chase off the outsiders, he had even given all the maids and cooks in the house a temporary holiday. Ning Ning took this action as 'clearing the venue'.

After the venue was cleared, it was the actors' turn to get on and perform on stage.

In the kitchen, the old chef fiercely poured the soup into the sink, making the water in the sink splashed about. Ning Ning stopped in her tracks and looked at the chef's back.

He placed five of the same little bowls on the table with his back to Ning Ning, then scooped up a ladle full of seafood soup and poured it in a straight line from left to right.

Once the five little bowls were filled with seafood soup, he suddenly reached into his pocket and took out a little bottle. He used his thumb to pop the bottle open and poured the powder-like substance into one of the bowls.

He turned back abruptly after he was done and told Ning Ning, "You did not see anything."

Ning Ning saw everything, thus she asked, "What did you put in the bowl?"

The old chef did not answer her question, he instead said to her, "Take a guess on how my leg was crippled."

Ning Ning shook her head.

"It was from protecting a little girl. My leg was crushed under a car." The old chef said, "Now the little girl has grown up. She loathes me, saying that I have Parkinson's, questioning why her father still keeps me around, wanting him to chase me out."

Ning Ning was shocked.

"I will leave this house very soon." The old chef cracked a smile. "Before I leave, I will teach her a lesson."

Old Master Lian's human nature test had begun.

The old chef was acting, his (acting skill) standard was that of an extra.

But even if the other party was an extra, Ning Ning tried her best to coordinate with him. She stood by the entrance of the kitchen, not daring to walk over, she pretended to smile in a lighthearted manner. "You must be joking, right? Poison? Just because of a few words?"

"It's for my leg." The old chef said coldly as he pointed at his crippled leg.

The smile on Ning Ning's face slowly faded. She looked at him with a little anxiety. "Why are you being calculative over someone who is ungrateful? These people are like farts, you should let it go, that way you can live a few extra years with a healthier mental state..."

The old chef was taken aback, "You, child, are not fastidious at all..."

"Hey, it's not like you didn't know that I am an uncultured person who grew up in a town, why would I be fastidious?" Ning Ning casually spread her hands out. It made her look like she was beyond fixing, the ladylike air she had presented to the old chef was completely gone and had been replaced with the air of a philistine, but this felt more intimate to the old chef instead.

The old chef was also just a common citizen. Even after he had given his leg up to save Lian Yuan Yuan's life and was made the head chef by Old Master Lian, he was never someone from the upper class.

No matter how expensive or neatly he dressed, how he got rid of his country accent and learnt to speak with good articulation, Lian Yuan Yuan would still take his sacrifice for granted. She would even feel that he had found a lifelong job because of the incident, and was it not a good thing for him? This kind of thing would not have happened between two people of equal standing. Lian Yuan Yuan only felt this way because she was in a superior position and only saw him as a servant.

He looked at Ning Ning in a weird way after he sorted his feelings out. "What are you doing?"

Just as he was in a daze, Ning Ning had already walked past him and was standing in front of the kitchen table. She grabbed a huge bunch of bottles before returning back to the old chef. Amongst the things she had picked up were salt, chilli sauce, MSG... She took a teaspoon of everything and poured it into a bowl of seafood soup.

"Death is too cheap of a price for her to pay." Ning Ning stirred the soup and handed it over to him. "Take it, I guarantee that she will spray soup from her nose. How about that? Don't you want to see

that? I think I would be able to tease her on it for twenty years."

The old chef stared at her for a while before asking, "She is your competitor, why are you helping her?"

"I'm not helping her, I just want to ridicule her." Ning Ning hmph-ed, she had a *tsundere* expression on her face. "Besides, if you were to kill someone, who would cook? I'm hungry, I feel like eating braised chicken with mushroom., can you make that for me?"

A few minutes later, the two of them returned to the feast one after another.

After they entered, the old chef shot a look at Old Master Lian, then placed the bowl of tampered soup in front of Lian Yuan Yuan without changing his expression.

—This bowl of soup was full of ingredients; including chilli oil, MSG, salt, etc.

Before Lian Yuan Yuan could have a taste of this bowl of dark cuisine, Old Master Lian spoke out, "I almost forgot, the doctor said that I cannot have seafood for the time being. Yuan Yuan, follow Old Chen into the kitchen, bring me a bottle of medicinal wine."

"Oh." Lian Yuan Yuan got up unwillingly.

When she returned, she not only brought back a bottle of medicinal wine, she also brought a bottle of white wine. The eldest son's eyes sparkled when he saw the bottle of white wine. He reached out and grabbed it from Yuan Yuan, saying to Old Master Lian as he opened it, "Father, let me share a glass with you, wishing you a speedy recovery."

Old Master Lian pushed the glass to the side and smiled at him. "If you want me to recover, you shouldn't make me drink, ask if any of the others wants to drink it."

Lian Yuan Yuan would never drink that bottle of tampered white wine, she immediately held her hands up. "I quit drinking, soup will do."

She took a spoonful of soup then sprayed it out from her nose.

"*Cough, cough, cough, cough, cough...* What's in this?" Lian Yuan Yuan said with tears in her eyes and snot in her nose.

The people at the dining table looked at her with disgust. The eldest son and his son immediately pushed the seafood soup in front of them away. Old Master Lian sighed, he looked at the tablecloth that was stained by Yuan Yuan and said, "Good thing the dishes have not

been served. Cheng Xin, go and hurry the dishes up. Tell Old Chen that we need a change of tablecloth while you're at it."

"Sure." The eldest son put the white wine down and told his son beside him, "Come on, we'll go together."

Ning Ning noticed that Old Master Lian's eyebrows had twitched slightly. It looked like he did not expect that they would act as a pair, but his eyebrows quickly calmed down because the father-son pair had already returned with the dishes. The father was holding the braised chicken with mushroom., while the son was holding a new tablecloth.

The old chef also brought dishes in once they were done changing the tablecloth.

The eldest son quickly placed the braised chicken with mushroom. in front of Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked down at the piping hot dish.

Due to a certain motive, they were dining on a long table.

There wasn't a lazy susan on the table. If a dish was placed far from you, you would have to stand up if you wanted to take a serving (of a dish placed) on the other side of the table—which was a little unbecoming, which was why most people would only eat what was placed right in front of them.

For example, the tampered seafood soup, the tampered white wine and the tampered braised chicken with mushroom..

Title: < <Poison> >

Starring: Ning Ning, Old Master Lian, Lian father and son, Lian Yuan Yuan.

Everyone was watching Old Master Lian, no one started eating before Old Master Lian started moving his chopsticks.

Ning Ning put a piece of mushroom into her mouth first.

She stared at the father-son pair as she chewed on the mushroom. The eldest son had it thought out. After he placed the braised chicken with mushroom. in front of Ning Ning, he did not look at her again. He had been talking and joking with the Old Master all along, but his son was not as subtle as him. The latter had his sights fixed on Ning Ning, seeming like he was waiting for her to make a fool of herself.

Before Ning Ning could make a fool of herself, a woman screamed.

"Don't drink that!!"

The eldest son was flabbergasted. He turned his head and looked at Lian Yuan Yuan. "What are you doing?"

Lian Yuan Yuan was still holding the wine glass she had grabbed from him, looking at him with a complicated expression. "You can't drink this, it has been poisoned."

The eldest son was shocked. "What did you say?"

"I'm sorry, Brother." She suddenly covered her mouth and cried. "Although you are full of yourself and have always treated me like a fool, but this fool cannot bear to see you die... You are my brother after all, Big Bro!"

Eldest son, "..."

Ning Ning sat by and watched her performance. Her acting skills were so pompous that Old Master Lian could not bear to watch, he coughed. "Enough."

Lian Yuan Yuan, "Father..."

Old Master Lian, "You have already cried for fifteen minutes, but you have not shed a single tear. You've wasted the lines your brain trust has prepared for you."

Lian Yuan Yuan, "..."

"Father." The eldest son had now realised that something was amiss, he asked in a low voice, "What is going on?"

"It was but a small test." Old Master Lian smiled, completely unconcerned. "I had Old Chen gave every one of you a poisoned item, let you personally deliver it to the dining table, put it in front of a certain relative in front of you—to see if you would just sit by and watch the other person eat it up, or if you would stop the other person before they can do so."

The expression on the eldest son's face immediately turned bad. Lian Yuan Yuan, on the other hand, was delighted.

"You are all a bunch of heartless people, especially you." Lian Yuan Yuan glared at Ning Ning. "There might be a little rift between me and my brother, but you? We have not even spoken, yet you want to watch me die just so you can have a bigger share of the inheritance?"

The old chef got close to Old Master's ear and whispered a few words to him.

Old Master Lian let out another sigh. "Get out."

"Hear that?" Lian Yuan Yuan had a victorious look, she told Ning Ning, "He told you to get out!"

"No." Old Master Lian looked at her. "You get out."

Lian Yuan Yuan looked at him with shock, "Father!"

"And you two," Old Master Lian kept his eyes on her as he told his eldest son, "get out too."

Although the eldest son was reluctant, he did not lose his cool like Lian Yuan Yuan did. He immediately stood up and left, dragging the hysteric Lian Yuan Yuan along with him on his way out.

"Let go of me, let go of me!" Lian Yuan Yuan struggled along the way.

"Enough, you have already lost." The eldest son said.

"Nonsense!" Lian Yuan Yuan looked at him furiously. "How did I lose? It was only me, I was the only one who stopped you from taking the poison, the two of you did not do so!"

"Do you not understand?" The eldest son said coldly, "Who do you think are the outsiders in this family?"

He answered his own question before Lian Yuan Yuan could, "It's us."

He looked at the firmly shut door with a complicated expression. They had been chased out, but the old chef remained inside.

"Even the chef knew about this, Lawyer Huang must have known as well, there might be other people who are in the know, who are those people? They are all outsiders." The eldest son murmured, "The old man would rather believe in them, he would rather discuss plans with them to make things difficult for us, who exactly are the outsiders here?"

Lian Yuan Yuan was taken aback by his words. She followed his line of sight to the door.

The firmly shut door was like Old Master Lian's heart, outsiders could go in, but "family" like them could not.

"...So the two of us both lost to the illegitimate granddaughter." The eldest son said while gritting his teeth, "While we were trying to curry favour with the old man, she has gotten the chef's favour."

"But, but he is only a chef..." Lian Yuan Yuan stuttered.

"But the old man trusts him." The eldest son could not help but laugh. "He would rather trust the chef, the lawyer and the family doctor over his own sons and daughters. So what is the use of getting his favour? It would have been better to curry favour with those 'outsiders'... I never thought that the illegitimate granddaughter would be the first one to find that out. Didn't you see how the old man chased us out immediately after the chef had whispered to him?"

Lian Yuan Yuan was dazed for a moment, then said with a twisted expression, "No! I have not lost!" She looked at the door coldly and thought: *She is about to die anyway, I have not lost!*

1Example image of pillbox:

Chapter 90

90: Forbearance

"Do you know why I made you stay?" Old Master Lian asked pleasingly.

Ning Ning's heart was as clear as a mirror, but she showed a doubtful face and shook her head.

"My eldest son had known that the dish had problems, yet he put it in front of you and watched as you ate it." Old Master Lian sighed again. "What about my third daughter? She could have stopped Old Chen, why did she wait till the dinner table? Wasn't it so that she could perform for me? But she couldn't even act, you saw it too, after crying for so long, not a single tear was shed..."

His expression suddenly became empty and desolate. He reached out to Ning Ning with both withered hands and said, "Come, come to grandpa's side."

Ning Ning walked towards him. Old Master Lian hugged Ning Ning as if she was a barbie doll, his aged fingers caressed her hair as he murmured, "Good thing I still have you, there was at least one who has a conscience... Lian Lian, you are the only one left for Grandpa."

"Lies." Ning Ning said in her heart.

If there was one person in this family who had been poisoned, it would be Old Master Lian himself.

He had been afflicted with a poison named 'distrust'.

Starting from now up until twenty years later, he would indulge in tests of human nature on his family members. The shorter ones would last a few months, the longer ones would last a year. He would collude with outsiders to come up with methods to test the morals of his own family members, then he would issue a new will.

The new will would overwrite the old will, the new inheritor would overwrite the old inheritor, he would never be bored of it. Like a despot actor who was unwilling to leave the stage once he had gotten on, forcing everyone to accommodate him and act out this show titled < <Poison> >...forever and ever.

Maybe only death would stop him.

"Alright, let's eat, it's getting cold." Old Master Lian dried the tears in the corners of his eyes and loosened his hug. "Are the dishes on the dining table enough for you? You can get Uncle Chen to make more if it's not enough."

"It's enough." Ning Ning said.

The meal today was made for six people, it had a total of ten dishes. There were main dishes and side dishes, they included sweet, salty, sour and spicy dishes. Old Master Lian didn't eat much, he put his chopsticks down after he took two bites. He urged Ning Ning to eat, but she was troubled, how could she have any appetite?

It was a good thing that Old Master Lian had a habit of taking afternoon naps, he started to feel sleepy at around 12 noon. He yawned and told Ning Ning, "You can go home for now. Pack your stuff up, I will get a driver to help you move in here. You should stop living outside, a family should live together."

"Tomorrow?" Ning Ning hesitated instead. "Isn't that too much of a rush?"

"How is that a rush, don't you have one day to pack up?" Old Master Lian laughed, but his words had a sense of tyranny, he would love to have everything arranged for her regardless of her wishes.

Ning Ning could only agree for now. She thought that she should have a discussion with Pei Xuan on how to deal with this later.

Ning Ning wheeled Old Master Lian out, leaving the old chef behind to clean up the leftovers.

They immediately saw a person waiting outside once they were out.

"Why are you still here?" Old Master Lian's belly was filled with rage the moment he laid his eyes on her, as he asked her with a discourteous expression.

But Lian Yuan Yuan chose to ignore him. She fixed her gaze on Ning Ning—a gaze that was full of shock, confusion and huge disappointment.

Ning Ning did not know why she had such a weird expression, but Ning Ning knew that Lian Yuan Yuan was not a good actor, her face would show whatever she was thinking, this was definitely her true feelings, but why?

Ning Ning escorted Old Master Lian upstairs. When she came back down, she saw that Lian Yuan Yuan was still waiting for her, in her hands was a plate, a plate of half-eaten braised chicken with

mushroom.

"I heard from Old Chen that you had more than half of this?" Lian Yuan Yuan inquired.

"That's right." Ning Ning did not understand why she would ask such a question.

Lian Yuan Yuan did not bother with the chopsticks, she poked a mushroom directly with her pinky and put it in her mouth.

"That has already gone cold." Ning Ning told her out of kindness, "If you are hungry, there's a warm one in the kitchen."

"There's no need." Lian Yuan Yuan licked her finger, then ferociously smashed the plate on the ground. Just as it hit the ground, she turned around and left out of the entrance briskly.

As she walked out of the door, the doors of the cars parked outside opened as well. Quite a number of people had come out from these cars to ask her about the situation. These people include the brain trust she had hired along with relatives and friends who had ulterior motives, there were even reporters who had come after they heard of what was happening. She ignored all of them while she pushed everyone away. She scanned the surroundings and found the figure of a certain person.

Ning Ning came out a step later than Lian Yuan Yuan. As everyone was surrounding Lian Yuan Yuan, there was no one at Ning Ning's side. A black car drove up to her as silently as a ghost.

"Get on." Pei Xuan winded down the window.

Ning Ning pulled the door open and entered the car.

Not far away, Lian Yuan Yuan had already seen this car. She mustered all her strength in an attempt to get out of the crowd, but they blocked her path. She could only watch as the car left. She could not help but shout, "Pei Xuan!"

The doors of the car blocked the wind and snow from the outside, it also blocked her voice.

As the two of them sat in the car, Ning Ning was about to tell him about the weird incident with Lian Yuan Yuan, but his mobile phone rang at this moment.

"Hello." Pei Xuan picked up the phone and answered the call for a while before handing it over to her. "It's for you."

For me? Ning Ning answered the phone with a face full of doubt.

Mu Gua's voice rang out from the other side, "Sis?"

"..." Ning Ning did not know whether to answer him. She was mindful of the fact that she was currently Lian Lian, not Mu Er.

"Hello, hello?" Mu Gua shouted a few times, then sighed, "I have known that you were pretending to be a young lady from the Lian family long ago, you can talk to me."

"Oh, you've known long ago." Ning Ning let out a breath, but she felt that something was off. He had known long ago? How long ago was that?

Before she could ask that question, Mu Gua had already started speaking, "Sis, I have something to tell you."

"What a coincidence." Ning Ning said, "I have something to tell you too."

Mu Gua, "You first."

"...I just left the Lian Estate." Ning Ning weighed her words. "Old Master Lian wants me to pack up and move into his house."

Mu Gua fell silent for a moment before he asked, "Does he treat you well?"

"He treats me pretty well." Ning Ning said insincerely.

He might treat her well now, it might not be the same in the future. But even if it did get worse, it wouldn't be as bad as what she was going through now. "Lian Lian" could do most of what "Mu Er" could not do. She could go to school if she wanted, she could go to the doctor if she wanted, she could provide a certain someone with financial support if she wanted—with a snap of her fingers, she could change a person's fate, a family's fate.

"...Are you leaving today?" Mu Gua asked.

"No," Ning Ning said, "I'll leave tomorrow."

"That's good, you should go home for today, I..." Mu Gua laughed after a pause. "I bought a gift for you."

Ning Ning felt that something was off. "Why did you buy a gift for me all of a sudden?"

"I was always making you mad." Mu Gua said gently, "Today, I did something that will anger you again, Sis, forgive me."

"What did you do?" Ning Ning could not help but ask. For some reason, she had a bad feeling about this.

But Mu Gua did not answer, he quickly changed the topic. "I am at a train station now. I will get on a train soon to work in another state. I won't be able to make a lot of money when I first start working, I won't be able to send money back home for you and mom. Taking care of mom alone would take a toll on you, I have left all the money I previously earned behind, do you know where I put it..."

"Get back here!" Ning Ning interrupted him, "Sis will have money very soon, I don't need you to work in another state. You get back here!"

"No, Sis." Mu Gua said, "Pass Pei Xuan the phone."

Ning Ning tried every possible way to persuade him, but he would not listen at all. Ning Ning had no choice but to pass the phone over to Pei Xuan, "Help me persuade him."

Pei Xuan put the phone to his ear, "Hello."

Snowy winds swept across the street, a small car travelled on the snowy ground, leaving behind two black lines, like a train track, heading for an unknown destination.

Pei Xuan's driver, gardener and butler were all in the small car. Two of them were in the backseat sandwiching Mu Gua in, one of them was holding a mobile phone, pressing it on Mu Gua's ear.

There was a bruise in the corner of Mu Gua's mouth, his hands were bound with scotch tape. He told Pei Xuan, "I didn't tell her anything."

A chuckle rang out from the other side.

"My sister doesn't know anything." Mu Gua said, "Let go of her."

Mu Gua had won. Pei Xuan had really sent every person he had to look for him, so much so that he did not have time for the things that were happening at the Lian Estate, so all his plans had failed. But Mu Gua had also lost. He had saved his sister but failed to save himself. Yet, if he could not convince Pei Xuan right now, he would not even be able to save his sister.

"She is not a smart person, she probably still thinks that you are a good guy." Mu Gua let out a bitter laugh. "My mother and I would always scold and beat her, but as long as we treat her a little better later on, she would commit herself to us again. As...as long as you treat her slightly better, treat her slightly better than I did, she would listen to everything you say."

"Can you bear to part with such a good sister?" Pei Xuan asked.

"..." Mu Gua remained silent, tears began welling up in his eyes.

"If you cannot bear to do so, I can send her to you." Pei Xuan's gentle voice had just droned out when Ning Ning shouted, "Send me to him!"

His lips trembled, a single tear fell from his eyes, Mu Gua lowered his head and choked, "I can bear to do so."

Ning Ning had already grabbed the mobile phone by then, she shouted in a threatening manner, "Stop right there, I will come to the train station right now!"

Mu Gua continued looking down, tears were streaming down from his eyes, but he had to act casual and laugh, "Alright, I won't go...not! Catch me if you can!"

As the traffic lights switched at a cross junction, the car with the sister and the car with the brother brushed past each other. One of them was busy using the phone, the other was looking down—in this last opportunity, neither of them had noticed that the two cars were going in the opposite direction.

At the train station, Ning Ning frantically got off the car. She shouted as she looked for Mu Gua, not stopping until it was midnight. She knelt in front of the platform, exhausted. A train sped past her, kicking up a gust of snowy winds, sweeping up her long hair. She could not help but hug herself tightly, a coat plopped on her from behind.

Pei Xuan stood behind her, wrapping her with the coat that had his body temperature and lowered his head as he said, "It's late, we'll look for him tomorrow."

"...Tomorrow?" Ning Ning looked at the platform in front of her, confused, as if she was someone who had alighted at the wrong station and didn't know which train she should take from here or what she should do tomorrow.

"Get a hold of yourself. You have to report to Old Master Lian tomorrow. You have almost made it, don't trip up at the last step." Pei Xuan told her, "Moreover, even if your brother has left, your mom is still here. Has she eaten today? Has her diaper been changed? Do you want to go back and take a look at her?"

...She did not have anywhere else to go, so Ning Ning returned home for the time being.

She could smell urine the moment she opened the door. Ning Ning

sighed again. She went over and changed the diaper and fed her before she sat at the side in a daze.

She used to resent the fact that this apartment was too small, so small it was suffocating. But today she felt that this apartment was too big, so big it made her shudder.

"That's right, the gift." Ning Ning said suddenly.

She got up and looked through the place. She finally found the gift Mu Gua had mentioned in the kitchen.

A box of cake and a gift box.

Ning Ning had not had dinner, she cut a slice of cake and ate it as she opened the gift.

In the box was a pile of toys, a toy train, a bamboo-copter, a robot...on top of them was a letter.

She opened up the letter, the first sentence read: "Sis, I'm sorry."

"I am a very selfish person. I had seen that you were so popular in school, there was even a boy who would send you home, so I wanted to make things hard for him, like charging him fifty dollars for a bowl of rice."

Even now I have not overcome this problem. The boss of a video tape store had asked me about you. I wanted to ignore him, but I was afraid that he would go to you directly, so I lied to him. I told him that you like toy trains, bamboo-copters and robots... Haha, he actually believed me. Everything in the box was what he bought for you. He would give me one every few days, it has already been a few months since this first started."

"...I was only afraid that once you found someone, you would ditch me. Sis, I cannot bear to lose you."

"I will stop doing that from now on. Your life is yours, you don't live for me... Finish the cake to commemorate how I've turned over a new leaf, let us both have a fresh start!"

Ning Ning's lips had white cream on it. She started to smile when she got to this part of the letter, but her smile suddenly froze.

She looked up and looked at her surroundings.

Before she could notice, the light bulb in her room had stopped making sizzling noises, the couple next door had stopped shouting at each other, even the sounds of the streets had disappeared from the window.

She turned over and took a look, she was stunned. She suddenly reached out and opened the window.

The cold wind that should have funneled in did not, the world outside was in dead silence, the winds did not blow, the snow had frozen in the air as she easily caught one in her palm.

Ning Ning had already seen and experienced similar things to this.

"Mu Gua." She murmured, "You're...dead?"

A lead character's death meant the end of the movie.

The world would turn into a quiet stage, darkness would close in from the sides like a curtain. Ning Ning stood in the center of the stage. Behind her was a candle she did not have the time to light, a cake she did not have the time to finish eating, a letter she did not have the time to finish reading.

—A pair of siblings who did not have the time to have a fresh start.

Ning Ning slowly opened her eyes in the audience seat.

A movie was screening in front of her, a young boy was singing deeply and helplessly.

"My angel talked to me today, she said I am as fat as a watermelon."

"My angel smiled at me. She laughed at my singing, saying that it sounded like a duck."

"For the sake of making her laugh, I quack, quack, quack..."

Chapter 91

91: Remorse

The movie had begun.

A filament lamp was crackling above his head.

Mu Gua looked up from the chair he was sitting on, his face was covered with a wet towel as he let out a painful cry.

A hand took the towel off and a man asked him, "Talk, have you been talking to Lian Lian from a long time ago?"

Mu Gua caught his breath, then shook his head.

"Where did she run off to?"

Mu Gua shook his head again.

"Who else knows about this?"

"...Just me." Mu Gua looked at the ceiling with a dazed expression, then shifted his sight to the man, "Just me."

"Good." The other party let out a laugh before he placed the towel on Mu Gua's face again.

Air was running out, his nose was getting filled with water. Mu Gua struggled as if he was drowning. On the verge of death, his short life flashed across his eyes.

The spring flowers blossomed, the figure of a girl who seemed to be standing in front of a source of light was approaching him with a smile.

"Angel..." He murmured in his heart.

The girl slowly walked towards him, the glow around her slowly disappeared and turned into an unbecoming set of old clothes. Suddenly, he was slapped across the face, then was grabbed by the collar and shouted at, "Fatass! Give me my character specification back!"

Mu Gua opened his eyes, the filament lamp and the viscous man had both disappeared, the only thing that was with him was his fat body. He smiled as his fats jiggled. "Sis..."

"How should I put it?" Shi Zhong Tang sat on the audience seat, he touched his chin with his right hand, as if he was a picky interviewer, he said regretfully, "Your performance this time is a failure."

"...What makes you say that?" Ning Ning was stunned, she turned and looked at him.

"Look." Shi Zhong Tang pointed at the screen with his chin.

On the screen, Ning Ning settled the school withdrawal procedures on her own, then walked into a hotel. She asked with hesitation, "Are you hiring?"

Oily plates were placed into a sink, coming out clean after. A pair of tender hands were placed into a sink, coming out full of frostbites after.

At the end of the month, this pair of frostbitten hands held onto a few crumpled pieces of cash and handed them to Mu Gua.

"Get yourself a new set of uniform and stationery." Ning Ning told Mu Gua with a tired expression, "Don't let your schoolmates make fun of you, saying that you are a kid that your parents don't love."

Mu Gua looked at her hands and did not take the money for a long time.

"You knew that the script on hand has problems, especially the character specifications of Mu Er, why did you still act according to it?" On the audience seats, Shi Zhong Tang looked at Ning Ning sincerely and asked, "Is it because it is easier to act according to the script?"

Ning Ning's face turned red, her eyes had a look of agitation of being misunderstood, "That's not it..."

"Then why?" Shi Zhong Tang asked as he looked back at the screen.

Pei Xuan's face appeared on screen. With his gold-framed glasses, he sat in a refined manner on the sofa across from Mu Gua and pushed a contract in front of him.

"Is it because of him?" Shi Zhong Tang asked.

Ning Ning pursed her lips, placing both of her hands on her knees and clenched her fingers tightly.

Pei Xuan's face remained on screen, but the person sitting across him had changed to Ning Ning, another contract was pushed forward.

"Ning Ning, look." Shi Zhong Tang put his arm around her

shoulders and said while he laughed, "A movie is around one and a half hours. What we are looking at now is the edited version of life, but real life is not that short. When you are in the movie, when you are another person, you can actually do a lot of things, try a lot of things that you usually would not or would be too afraid to do..."

"...How can I do that?" Ning Ning said in a low voice, "How can I change another person's life wily nily?"

"So that's it." Shi Zhong Tang said, this time his voice did not have doubt, it had a tone of surety, he laughed at Ning Ning and said, "You are afraid."

"Should I not be afraid?" Ning Ning asked him in return.

"Who are you afraid of? Pei Xuan? He is indeed quite scary. You may lose if you were to go up against him, but you can't not have the courage to go up against him." Shi Zhong Tang gazed towards the screen. "Take a look at what you are doing."

Ning Ning sprang up from her seat, but Shi Zhong Tang forcefully pushed her back down.

It was painful to be forced to watch this movie. Just like those trash movies she used to act in—shame, remorse, she was infinitely disappointed at herself...

"You are acting with your hands and feet bound because you are too scared. Be it Mu Er or Lian Lian, they both had the same feeling from your portrayal." Shi Zhong Tang shook his head. "The feeling of one who was resigned to their fate."

Ning Ning opened her mouth, but she realised that she was unable to retort. No amount of excuses would be as convincing as what the actual movie was showing. Within the screen, her Mu Er and Lian Lian took turns to appear. Her expressions, movement, and even her tone of speech and habits were completely different, but the melancholy between her eyebrows were exactly the same.

They were even doing the same thing...submitting.

"Submitting to your mother, submitting to your brother, submitting to Pei Xuan, submitting to fate." Shi Zhong Tang shook his head, "You did not even retaliate once, do you think that is normal?"

That was of course not normal.

Submitting to her mother was to be expected, because she held all the power in the family, she managed money and thus managed Ning Ning.

But after her mother had met up with an accident, Ning Ning would hold all the power in the family, she would manage money and Mu Gua.

Based on this situation, she could have chosen to take revenge on the little fatty, she could also choose to let bygones be bygones and work together. The one thing that was the least likely was for her to continue to bear the same hardship without complaints, making herself his slave.

This wasn't a melodrama film, it was reality. It was the life of an actual person, it bore the weight of a person's happiness, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate along with the most genuine yet most selfish thoughts.

Ning Ning did not carefully consider this at all.

Looking back, she realised that she had only acted according to Lian Lian's biography, according to the script, according to her character specification.

But it just so happened that both the script and character specification were fake.

"Ning Ning, the script is not important. In Life Theater, no one would shout NG at you, no one would blame you for wasting film. You don't have to be so nervous every time, you don't have to be afraid of making mistakes." Shi Zhong Tang gently caressed Ning Ning's cheeks. "Although people might say life is a play, but a play has a fixed setting, fixed characters, fixed opening and a fixed ending. Life is different. There are limitless possibilities waiting for you to explore! You can be afraid! But you cannot be stagnant, you have to be willing to try."

Boom. Those words were like a hammer on Ning Ning's shell. They had smashed her shell into pieces, they fell to the floor. The first piece was overcautiousness, the second was prudence, the third was wariness. Although there were still quite a lot of the shell left, she at least had started to regret her performance in this movie.

Ning Ning sighed once more. "Why did you not tell me this before, if you had told me..."

Her vision shifted to the movie screen. At the end of the story, the scene shifted back to the beginning. Under the filament lamp, a wet towel covered Mu Gua's face, this time, he slowly stopped struggling...

"It's never too late to change." Shi Zhong Tang laughed at her as he said this.

Ning Ning wanted to laugh too, but she couldn't.

Is it true that it's never too late?

"...It's getting late." Ning Ning murmured, "If Mu Er had chosen to become Lian Lian at the end, she would be working towards the same goal. She would know who I am, Pei Xuan would too."

As she said that, Ning Ning could not help but look at the entrance of Life Theater.

"...Maybe once I go out, there would be someone outside waiting for me." Ning Ning muttered.

Like she said.

At the entrance of Life Theater, in the silent night with no stars nor moon.

A car was parked in front of the entrance. The interior of the car could not be seen clearly due to the dark skies. All you could make out was the figure of a person, sitting in the driver's seat, looking in the direction of the entrance.

Chapter 92

92: My Angel

Ning Ning and Lian Lian met through an audition video.

Ning Ning portrayed two roles in that video, acting as the leading and supporting female characters in < <Person by the Pillow> > at the same time—Yan Qing and Yun Lin.

She had acted too realistically, to the point where she included details only the person in question would know.

It didn't matter if Yan Qing saw this video, it also wouldn't be a big problem if Lian Lian were to see it—at least that was what Ning Ning thought before she watched < <My Angel> >.

But she didn't think so anymore.

She took out her mobile phone and gave Lian Lian a call.

The phone rang for a few times before it was answered. Ning Ning sorted out her emotions before she said with a smile, "For the sake of having a deeper understanding for the role of Mu Er, I visited her old home."

Lian Lian did not answer for a while, but she did not hang up either, thus Ning Ning continued.

"...Along with her alma mater, I met her classmates, friends, neighbour, boss, landlord." Ning Ning said, "That's when I discovered..."

"What did you discover?" Lian Lian finally spoke.

She had always claimed to need to have her beauty sleep at ten everyday, that it was the iron clad rule. But her voice right now was very clear. It looked like the rule did not matter. What mattered was who was the person calling her, and what was the content of the call.

"...I discovered that Mu Er had never had a friend named Lian Lian in her entire life.." Ning Ning said, "No one had seen her, Mu Er had not mentioned her to anyone as well..."

"What's weird about that?" Lian Lian laughed, "Is it a must for you to introduce a friend to everyone you know?"

"It's not weird for anyone else, but it's a little weird for the two of you." Ning Ning held her phone, "I remember that this is what you've written in the biography—the both of you lived on the same street, attended the same school, grew up in the same living conditions, sharing the same dreams and also the same devilish little brother. The two of you were similar in every way, including your looks. Under such circumstances, how would the people around her only see Mu Er and not you?"

"Hold on." Lian Lian suddenly interrupted her with a slightly dangerous tone, "Who told you we looked identical?"

Indeed, her biography was very detailed, it even included the name of the street and the school.

But the only detail that was left out, the most important detail—Lian Lian and Mu Er looked identical.

"There is only one explanation." Ning Ning took a deep breath. "Mu Er disappeared once Lian Lian appeared. Once Lian Lian had appeared, Mu Er had ceased to exist, so...should I address you as Lian Lian, or Mu Er?"

The other party fell silent for a long while. Lian Lian's voice rang out once again, saying coldly, "Come out, I am at the entrance of the theater."

At the entrance of Life Theater, a car was parked silently under the night sky. Lian Lian was leaning on the car. There were already a few cigarette butts on the ground. She took out a lighter and lit another cigarette up.

Lian Lian looked up and smiled at Ning Ning the moment she walked out of the door. "Refer to me as Lian Lian, Mu Er used to be a food item, but that term has turned into something bad recently¹, especially because I am wearing black today."

Ning Ning did not care what her name was, she had a more pressing matter on hand.

"How did you know I was here?" Ning Ning looked at her with caution.

"I didn't know that you were here before I arrived." Lian Liang motioned to what was behind her with her chin. "I saw that after I got here."

Ning Ning looked back and saw that the movie poster from before was still on the wall.

< <My Angel> >

Starring: Mu Gua, Ning Ning.

Nothing on it had changed, the fatty was the same fatty, the gift box was the same gift box, the letter was the same letter, the words on the letter were the same words. The situations surrounding Ning Ning seemed to have not changed as well. But the history she had experienced was true history, which proved one thing—the little fatty was doomed to die! No matter if Ning Ning transmigrated, his sister was fated to meet Pei Xuan, he was also fated to die for his sister.

Just as Ning Ning turned around and looked at the poster, Lian Lian's voice rang out from beside her ear, asking, "Should I address you as Yun Lin, or Ning Ning?"

Ning Ning looked back at her with surprise.

"There's nothing to be surprised about. When you investigated me, I investigated you too." Lian Lian inhaled from the cigarette aggressively. "There are a lot of people named Pei Xuan, but not a lot of them are bad guys, there are even less of them that would toy with a person's life. Hehe, the Pei Xuan in < <Person by the Pillow> > is most likely the one I know."

Although she had this hunch from a long while ago, Ning Ning still felt shivers hearing it out of Lian Lian's mouth.

"Didn't you say you don't remember him..." Ning Ning let out a bitter laugh just as she finished her sentence.

So what if she didn't remember? Pei Xuan wouldn't have left. He had spent so much effort on turning her into an imitation rich mistress from a wealthy family, how could he have left without getting something out of it? That was why they had more than enough time to be reacquainted with each other, more than enough time to collude with each other.

But this was a personal matter, an outsider should not be the one to probe.

Thus there was no reason to go deeper into that question, Ning Ning asked her the most pressing question, "So? Have you already told him about me?"

Lian Lian walked slowly towards Ning Ning with a cigarette between her fingers.

Then, she slowly reached out with a ticket in hand.

An even-number designated ticket.

Ning Ning did not take the ticket. She looked at Lian Lian with doubt and caution, she didn't quite understand why Lian Lian was doing this.

"Take it." Lian Lian said.

"There's no free lunch in this world." Ning Ning said.

"Then take a guess. If you can guess what ticket it is, I will give it to you." Lian Lian laughed. "I will even tell you how these types of tickets come about."

Ning Ning looked down at the ticket in her hand for a very long time, before slowly looking up and squeezing a few words out from the gap of her teeth, "Designated ticket. One of the two types of designated tickets, the even-number designated ticket that designates time. Now it's your turn, tell me how this ticket came about."

The normal tickets had too much of a limitation, the dangers of a staff ticket were far too great. On the contrary, the two types of designated tickets were the most useful, but they were also the most rare. Up until now, Ning Ning did not even know how those tickets came about, she also did not know any ways to collect them.

"The designated tickets are the same as the normal tickets. They are both sent by the theater, a maximum of three per person." Lian Lian answered, "The difference is, the meaning of a standard ticket is—a person yearning to change their life. That's why there are many people who get normal tickets, because humans are selfish. But when a person does not want to change their life, when they want to change the life of another person, but that person had already unfortunately entered the theater and become one of the staff members..."

She put the even-number designated ticket into Ning Ning's hand as she spoke word by word, "Then, the theater would send the person these kinds of tickets. Not only does it designate the time or character, it designates a specific masked person!"

This sentence was enlightening. Ning Ning held her ticket. Somehow, she immediately remembered something from a long time ago, she remembered the first designated ticket she got. The designated ticket had come from Wen Xiao Ning, grasping Ning Ning's arm on the verge of death while roaring hoarsely: "1988! 1988! 1988!" It was not an attachment to time, but an attachment to a certain person. It was not remorse against time, but a remorse towards a certain person.

"You want to rescue Mu Gua?" Ning Ning asked her while holding the ticket.

Lian Lian looked at the direction of the entrance with a complicated expression. The entrance was so dark and so deep, she could not see the inside. She could only vaguely see the outline of a mask. Who was looking at her from the darkness?

"You portrayed him in such a terrible manner in your biography." Ning Ning looked at what she was looking at, "I thought you hate him a lot."

"I do hate him a lot." Lian Lian hmph-ed coldly. "He's so fat and chubby, like a lump of melted butter, so pasty. He also always had it out for me. He was clearly the little brother, but he would always order me, the elder sister, around. Mom didn't even stop him, both of them had treated me like a maid..."

She rambled on and on, venting her grievances continuously.

After she was done venting, she sighed. "In the end, I received two tickets. One of them is with Pei Xuan, the other is with you, they are both designated tickets..."

A person could deceive one self, but they could not deceive Life Theater.

If you wanted to alter your fate, the theater would send you normal tickets.

If you wanted to alter the fate of a designated target, the theater would send you designated tickets.

No matter how you cursed or swore, how much you denied it, the type of ticket you received would prove the type of desire you had in your heart.

"...Anyway, I will not go rescue him, you can do it if you want." Lian Lian tossed her cigarette on the floor and crushed it under her high heel, then she turned around. "While you're at it, let me tell you something. Not only has Pei Xuan changed his name, even his age on his identity card has changed. He's like a brand new person, having money and power. He doesn't only have those few lackeys anymore. I am also an accomplice under him, so it is very clear to me that at present, the two of us cannot beat him...unless one of us returns to the past, back to the time before he gained money and power."

"Of course I'll be the one to go back." Ning Ning shouted at the back of Lian Lian.

Lian Lian's figure froze.

"You're afraid of Pei Xuan, me too." Ning Ning said, "I know that he is very sinister and very cunning, he might even be very rich. He could even be a certain famous director or the boss of a certain movie company. He might be able to destroy my future with one word, that is why I want to go back to the past, back to when he was just cunning but not crafty, I will deal with him with even more caution."

"...Up to you." Lian Lian left with that sentence. As she opened the door and bent down to enter the car, she suddenly turned around and rushed towards Ning Ning, reaching out, wanting to take her designated ticket back, but she retracted her trembling fingers at the last moment. Lian Lian combed her hair back with her hand. Ning Ning did not know when it happened, but Lian Lian's face was full of tears.

"Are you alright?" Ning Ning asked.

"I'm fine." Lian Lian shook her head. "It's just...twenty years ago, I could do anything for my brother, but I don't have the courage for it anymore..."

Lian Lian seemed to have aged a decade after she said that, her back quickly hunched. She bid Ning Ning goodbye, then stumbled towards her car. When she opened the door of her car, she muttered to Ning Ning with her back faced to her, "If you are really going back to the past, could I trouble you with something...? Turn me back into Mu Er, work in a normal job, marry someone normally, it would be best if I married the video tape store boss, start gaining weight after giving birth to a few kids... If Mu Gua would dare to laugh at me, I would just laugh at him back."

She choked, "...Because he would have had a family by then, he would have gotten even fatter from his wife feeding him..."

Ning Ning was stunned, then slowly looked back at the theater entrance behind her.

She didn't understand. The little fatty had already slimmed down, why did he remain as a little fatty when he turned into a masked person?

The answer might be beside her.

Why must she marry the video tape store boss out of all the people in the world? Because it was her brother's expectation. Why must he be a fat-masked person when he could be a slim one? Because it was his sister's expectation.

So much expectations, so much silent love, so much unspoken words, they could actually be summed up in a sentence—You are my angel, I want to protect you.

1The term "mu er(木耳)" usually refers a type of fungus that is edible with a few variations, . But over time the term "black mu er(黑木耳)" which is one of the variations of the fungus, has also become a slang for females who have dark g*nitals with the connotation that they were so because the owners are 'loose'.

Chapter 93

93: Returning to 1997

After this, it was a week of dormancy.

Within this week, Lian Lian did not look for Ning Ning, Ning Ning also did not take the initiative to contact her.

What needed to be said had already been said, what needed to be conveyed had already been conveyed, what was next was to wait—

To wait for the most suitable movie.

But as the days went by, Ning Ning's way of thinking began to change.

"Wen Xiao Ning waited her whole life for the movie she wanted the most and yet she did not get it." She thought, "Why would I be able to get what I want?"

Within this week, Ning Ning visited Life Theater every late night to take a look at the new posters on the wall.

The poster changed every night. Movies were screened every night, from <<Lady of the Night>> to <<Backup Boyfriend>>, from <<Midnight Tales>> to <<Hot-Blooded Boxing>>. No one entered the theater, but the movies would still screen exactly on time for the empty cinema, showing the happiness, anger, sadness and joy of a person's life.

Another week had passed, Ning Ning received a call from Lian Lian.

"There's no time anymore." Lian Lian told her in exasperation, "You can't afford to wait anymore, look for a movie that happens in around the same time period and go in."

"What happened?" Ning Ning asked.

"Did you not see the entertainment news today? Yan Qing unintentionally divulged your secret." Lian Lian let out a cold laugh. "She said you were her ideal female supporting character when she was getting interviewed, she even mentioned the incident with the audition video."

Ning Ning's heart thumped.

"It might not have been intentional, but <<The Great Empire>> has been a hit show recently, you are also rising in popularity along with it. There are quite a number of reporters trying to dig up information on you." Lian Lian said, "I will try my best to suppress this, but as a precaution, you should not wait anymore."

"I understand." Ning Ning looked at the poster in front of her, "I will set out tonight."

Title: <<Dreams of the Future>>

Starring: <<Xu Rong>>

This was a fairytale-like poster.

On the poster was red-coloured ground, there were many trees. What grew on the trees were not flowers nor fruits, but were pretty clothes, expensive shoes, cute hats, there were also bags of snacks and popsicles as well. It was very colourful, lustrous and dazzling, it looked like the world of a fairytale.

A pair of mother and daughter were standing beneath the trees. The mother smiled as she picked a pink hat from the tree and put it on the head of her young daughter, her daughter smiled as she looked at her mother.

This image was heartwarming and beautiful, it was virtually the dream of a child.

Ning Ning stared at the poster for a while before she muttered softly, "Nanny Xu..."

Xu Rong was Ning Ning's nanny when she was a child.

There was a period of time when Mama was very busy with work, she did not even have time for her own meals, not to mention cooking for Ning Ning, so she hired Nanny Xu to take care of her.

But that was only up till she was four. After that, Nanny Xu's child needed someone to take care of her, so she quitted and went home to take care of her child.

This was also in the period Ning Ning wanted to transmigrate to, the period where she was three going on to four, which was also 1997.

"I want to designate the time, 1997." Ning Ning handed the ticket to Boss Qu. "...Are you going to stop me this time?"

Boss Qu tried to stop her every time, only this time, he took the ticket without saying a word and tore it clean in half before stepping

out of the way from the entrance.

"...This time is the only exception." He looked at her with a complicated expression.

Behind the entrance, another man was waiting for her.

"You're here." Shi Zhong Tang was sitting with one leg crossed over the other in the audience seats. Upon seeing Ning Ning's arrival, he acted like a spoiled child and complained to her, "You picked this film out of all the others?"

That tone, it was like a boy who liked to watch <<Saw>>, but was forced to watch <<Tiny Times>> 1 with his girlfriend.

Ning Ning sat down as she put up with his complaint, she sighed, "Watch a children's film with me sometime."

Shi Zhong Tang burst into laughter from beside her. "Children's film?"

Ning Ning turned her head and looked at him, asking doubtfully, "What is it?"

"You definitely did not look at the poster carefully." The smile on Shi Zhong Tang's face faded, he looked at her seriously. "You have to look at it seriously, that's how you will know that not only is this not a children's film...it is also quite a dangerous movie for you."

Ning Ning was taken aback, although Shi Zhong Tang usually liked to joke around, he would never joke about anything this serious. Since that was what he said, this was definitely not a children's movie...but why? What were the dangers hidden in the fairytale-like poster?

At this instance, Ning Ning wanted to go out for a moment. It need not be too long, a minute or two would suffice. She wanted to take a look at the poster again, to see if she had missed out on any details. The problem was that according to the rules of Life Theater, once the customer stepped in, they could not leave before they finished the movie. Furthermore, even if she could leave, how would she come back? She had no more tickets on hand.

"What makes you say that? Tell me?" Ning Ning asked the person in front of her in a wilful manner, "What's dangerous about this?"

Shi Zhong Tang seemed to want to say something to her, but just as he opened his mouth, his body froze, like a person in a video that was suddenly paused.

"...I can't say." After a while, he touched the lip part of his mask

with his mouth as he said depressingly, "How troublesome, this theater doesn't allow spoilers."

The lights dimmed just as he finished speaking.

The screen turned white for a while, then a sentence appeared.

"This film has been adapted from a true story."

Next, the voice of a woman rang out. She sang quietly like she was singing a lullaby, "I pluck a red dress for you, I pluck a yellow hat for you, I pluck a pair of white boots for you, I pluck a good future for you... Wishing you bliss, my daughter..."

"There's no time." Shi Zhong Tang placed his hand over Ning Ning's hand. "Remember, be careful of the people around you."

A sense of weightlessness came over her along with Shi Zhong Tang's words. It felt like being in an elevator that was falling down from a few hundred meters up, in the end she landed on the ground with a crash.

"Cut!"

Ning Ning opened her eyes abruptly, then looked at her surroundings.

She was surrounded by giants.

No, not giants. Ning Ning looked down at her palms. Her fingers were so delicate and small, she was at most three or four years old, the adults who stood in front of her were all giants.

She had transmigrated as a child.

"Ah-choo!" Ning Ning had a tiny sneeze, a strand of translucent liquid flowed out of her nose. Alright, not only was she a child, she was a sick child.

Ning Ning could not help but shiver.

It was over, how was she supposed to deal with Pei Xuan with this body? He might make her fall on her butt with a flick of his finger...

"Doesn't she only have the flu? Why did she start shivering?" A man parted the crowd and walked over. The moment he bent down and looked at Ning Ning he said in a resigned manner, "Now that it has come to this, how can she film the next scene? Substitute! Substitute!"

"Director Liu, isn't that bad?" A person who looked like an assistant said awkwardly, "This child is..."

"I know! She's Ning Yu Ren's daughter!" Director Liu said with rage, "She's not the only one who wants to form a mother-daughter duo, I want to do it too! The problem is that this child is too sick! We can't stop filming just because of her! We're done here. Take the child down to rest, I will talk to Ning Yu Ren."

This was a director who was resolute and driven. As he finished what he had to say, he immediately left the crew.

A group of people looked at each other, they could only temporarily take a break. The assistant brought Ning Ning to the side so she could sit down. They even poured a cup of warm water for her and told her to slowly drink it.

Ning Ning held the cup. The weather was not cold, but both her hands were still trembling.

It was unlucky enough for her to transmigrate as a child, what was even more unlucky for her—was that this child was herself.

Her every word and movement might very well change the fate of her own future. These changes could make her future better, but it could also make it worse. The best choice would be for her to maintain her current situation, but if she chose to do nothing...wouldn't it continue to spell the end of Lian Lian and Mu Gua? Wouldn't Pei Xuan continue to get away scot-free?

"No matter what, I have to confirm my current situation." Ning Ning gulped the cup of water down, then got up from the chair. She walked around the crew with her tiny legs.

No one would be wary of a three- to four-year-old child, no one stopped her from going anywhere.

A male actor sat on a chair, he was holding a script with his right hand, trying to memorise his lines during the break. Ning Ning could not make out what he was mumbling. She thought about it, then walked over and climbed up his knees before sitting on his lap to take a look at the script.

The actor got a shock. Just as he was about to push her off, she turned around and looked at him, exclaiming with her childish voice, "Meow."

The actor smiled in response. He pulled her in closer as if she was a cat that was not afraid of humans, he even asked her, "Uncle doesn't have fish for you, will fruits do?"

Ning Ning nodded.

The actor then got his assistant to bring an orange for her. Ning Ning ate the orange as she sat on his lap listening to him memorising his lines.

As he read more of the lines, Ning Ning slowly figured out which movie he was acting in.

The title of the movie was—< <Dreams of the Future> >.

The story revolved around a male author and a mysterious woman.

The male author picked up a diary on the seventh of March, but the content of the diary was that of the eighth of March. He did not bother with it at first, but on the next day, the things that were written in the diary came true.

The male author went through great lengths before he finally found the owner of the diary; it was the mysterious woman. She claimed that she could predict the future through dreams...

The investor-cum-male-lead for this movie was Fei Yan, a singer who was quite famous at that time; he had intended to break into the acting circle with this film. And the person who would be acting as the mysterious woman was none other than the actress who won the movie empress award from the previous year, Ning Yu Ren.

"That's strange." Ning Ning furrowed her brows and thought, "Since they are shooting < <Dreams of the Future> >, what am I doing here?"

As the daughter of a popular actress, she had benefits regular people usually wouldn't have. She did act in some movies and television shows in her childhood—she could be considered as a slightly popular child star—but among these movies and shows, < <Dreams of the Future> > was not one of them...

"You finished the orange?" The male actor asked from behind, "Do you want another one?"

Ning Ning had wanted to shake her head, but someone suddenly caught her eye.

She originally thought that she was seeing things, thus she frantically rubbed her eyes. After she had a good look at who it was, she immediately pointed at the person and shouted, "I don't want oranges, I want that."

After that, she climbed off the male actor's legs and ran after the person with her two tiny legs.

The person seemed to be an extra. She was holding a bun in her hand. The bun had long turned cold, it should be leftovers from breakfast. She immediately sat on the ground and read the script as she chewed on her bun.

Suddenly, a shadow loomed over her face.

She looked up and saw that a little girl was standing in front of her.

She recognised the child. It was the daughter of the movie empress, Ning Ning, who was supposed to act as the mysterious woman during her childhood years. Thus, she flattered Ning Ning with a smile. "Little girl, do you have business with Big Sister?"

Ning Ning stared at the face in front of her.

The person who was not supposed to appear here had also appeared.

"...Big Sister Mu Er?" Ning Ning shouted to probe her.

The other party was stunned for a moment before she said with a smile, "You got the wrong person. Big sister is not Mu Er, I am Yu Sheng."

"Yu Sheng?" Ning Ning stared at this face that looked exactly like Mu Er's when she was a teenager. She thought about it for a while before she finally remembered the girl who had been confined in the attic by Pei Xuan.

After the real Lian Lian died, Pei Xuan found two girls one after another to act as her. Mu Er was the second one. She did not even know the name of the first one, she only knew that she was once an actress.

An extra was also an actress!

It was already a miracle that there were three people who looked exactly like each other, Ning Ning did not believe that there would be a fourth. The person in front of her was probably the first girl Pei Xuan had found.

But since she was still an extra, then Pei Xuan probably had not found her yet.

"What do I do?" Ning Ning thought to herself, "Should I say anything to her, or should I do anything?"

1Tiny Times is an actual movie.

Chapter 94

94: Prophecy

A child was a very restrictive and difficult character.

Especially a child who was around four years old. They were physically weak, they spoke in phrases and declarative sentences, they could not really use long sentences or complicated sentence structures, there was always an adult around them to look after them, they almost had no freedom.

A child could not do the things an adult would be able to do, a child could not say the things an adult would be able to say. If Ning Ning were to tell Yu Sheng about Pei Xuan in a straightforward manner, the latter would definitely not believe her. She had to use another method, a method unique of a child to caution her.

Ning Ning cozied up beside Yu Sheng and looked at her script, "Who are you acting as?"

"I'm acting as a female teacher." Yu Sheng answered with a smile.

Ning Ning scanned the script, the role that was marked on it was Female Teacher A, there were a total of three lines.

"What was I doing in your dreams?"

"It's just a dream, teacher will not die."

"Ah!"

It was a role that would have a small screen time then die an unnatural death.

She was going to portray the kindergarten teacher of the female lead character. The female lead dreamt of her death one day, so she described her dream to the teacher, but the teacher did not believe it. In the end, she looked up and was smashed in the head by a flower pot.

This was not a difficult role, the lines were not difficult either; but to prevent any mistakes, Yu Sheng would still read the lines repeatedly. She would occasionally make gestures to go along with the lines she was reading out.

"Teacher." A child's voice suddenly rang out from beside her.

Yu Sheng who was immersed in her role came back to her senses. She turned her head to look at Ning Ning. "Hmm?"

"I dreamt of you yesterday." Ning Ning sniffled as she looked at her.

Yu Sheng was stunned for a while, then smiled and asked her, "What was I doing in your dreams?"

Ning Ning, "I dreamt that you died."

"That was just a dream." Yu Sheng touched Ning Ning's head. "Teacher will not die."

Ning Ning did not say anything, her eyes slowly shifted upwards and looked above her head.

Yu Sheng thought it was strange, she also looked up above her head, then both of her eyes widened, "Ah!"

The scene ended here.

"You acted really well." Yu Sheng praised Ning Ning without hesitation. "You're so talented, you would definitely become a famous actress like your mother in the future."

Ning Ning immediately acted like a real four-year-old who would revel in any praise. The moment someone praised her she would smile really widely like she was floating in the air. For the sake of getting praised again, she tugged on Yu Sheng's sleeve, "Again!"

It was a good thing to be able to rehearse with someone. Moreover, establishing a good relationship with her would equate to establishing a good relationship with Ning Yu Ren, thus Yu Sheng did not decline. After they finished for the second time, Ning Ning sniffled, but this time she did not suck the snot back in, it dribbled out, making things very awkward...

"Wait for me." Yu Sheng quickly got off the floor and borrowed a roll of paper towel. She pinched Ning Ning's nose with the paper towel and said, "Here, blow your nose."

Ning Ning blew her nose a few times. While she was doing that, she stared at Yu Sheng's face as if she was trying to confirm something.

"I really did dream of you yesterday." Ning Ning said abruptly.

Yu Sheng thought that Ning Ning was still rehearsing the scene with her, thus she reflexively read out the next line, "What was I doing in your dreams?"

"An uncle wanted you to act for him." Ning Ning said.

Yu Sheng was stunned for a moment. She could not speak for a long while.

"What am I acting as?" She smiled and asked in the end.

"Lian Lian." Ning Ning ran past her once she answered the question.

Yu Sheng turned back and saw a few people walking over—the director, his assistant, Ning Yu Ren and others... They were all important people whom an insignificant person like her could not afford to mess with. She quickly stood up and put her hand with the paper towel behind her back.

"Mama!" Ning Ning jumped on Ning Yu Ren.

Ning Yu Ren bent down and picked her off the floor, nodded to Yu Sheng then turned around and left. Ning Ning hugged her neck and waved her hand at Yu Sheng.

Yu Sheng smiled back at her and waved at her. It looked like she did not take her words to heart, or maybe she treated her words as nonsense a child would say; but even if Ning Ning were to tell her the truth in a straightforward manner, it would probably still be treated as nonsense.

"I cannot make you believe me now." Ning Ning looked at her and thought, "The day Pei Xuan finds you, you will think of me and remember what I told you today... My prophecy."

Then, Ning Ning left the crew in Ning Yu Ren's arms.

A car was already waiting at the entrance. As Ning Yu Ren bent down to put Ning Ning in the car, she frantically hung on to her neck and shouted repeatedly, "No! I don't want to go!"

"Don't be silly." Ning Yu Ren pinched her face. She had the expression of someone looking at a child throwing a tantrum. "You're sick, you should go home to take your medicine and rest. Mama will come home and play with you after I finish filming."

But Ning Ning could not leave. <<Dreams of the Future>> started filming in August, Yu Sheng would meet up with an accident somewhere in September. Within a month, Pei Xuan would find Yu Sheng, Yu Sheng would then become a vegetable due to a traffic accident in this period of time. So in this month, Ning Ning had to stay with the crew, she had to be in a place where she could directly be in contact with Yu Sheng.

So she racked her brain to come up with an excuse. "I want to act too."

"It's fine, you can just take a good rest." Ning Yu Ren gently shook her head. "Mama will get someone to act for you."

Things ultimately still turned into what Ning Ning remembered.

Although she took part in the shooting for <<Dreams of the Future>>, eventually she had to be substituted due to her sickness, losing the role of the child female lead.

She returned home with a heavy heart. Nanny Xu Rong had already prepared a mountain of food for her.

"Be good, don't be sad, have a bite of the little bunny." She put a rabbit in Ning Ning's bowl.

It was a steamed bun in the shape of a rabbit, cute and exquisite. After you take a bite, the rich custard would flow out. It was a dessert children like to eat.

Although Ning Ning was in a very bad mood, but this rabbit steamed bun gave off the scent of childhood, so she ate a few consecutively. She was small, so was her appetite. When the main dishes were served, she rubbed her stomach and discovered that she was almost full, thus she got off the chair to walk around the house to help with digestion.

"You won't grow up if you don't eat. Here, take a bite." Xu Rong filled a little bowl with rice and dishes. Ning Ning was acting like a mischievous little princess, Xu Rong followed her wherever she went.

Ning Ning had already given her face by taking a bite. She said in a coquettish tone, "I'm already full."

"Then take your medicine first," Xu Rong said, "take a rest after you have your medicine, you can eat your meal after you wake up."

She fed Ning Ning a few flu pills. The flu pills contained chlorpheniramine which caused drowsiness as a side effect. Thus, not long after she ate them, Ning Ning started to yawn nonstop.

Xu Rong carried her to her bed and pulled a blanket over her, gently patting her chest with her hand as she hummed a melody without lyrics.

Ning Ning remembered that melody, it was the main theme for <<Dreams of the Future>>: "I pluck a red dress for you, I pluck a yellow hat for you, I pluck a pair of white boots for you, I pluck a good future for you... Wishing you bliss, my daughter..."

"Nanny Xu," Ning Ning looked at her, "Do you have children?"

"I do." Xu Rong looked at her gently. "I have a daughter."

"How old is she?"

"She is as old as you."

"Where is she?"

"She's..."

Those words blurred out, Ning Ning did not listen carefully, because she fell asleep.

She did not know whether the effects of the pills were too great or her flu had worsened, she still felt dizzy when she woke up the next day.

Xu Rong fed her milk custard by her side. Ning Ning shook her head, she was unwilling to eat it.

"I want Mama." She said weakly, what she thought was: *I want to return to the crew!*

"You're already this sick." Xu Rong reached out and touched her head while she said with tender love, "I have already given your mother a call, she would be back soon. Here, have some medicine first."

Ning Ning struggled to get up to take the medicine. She gulped down the cup of water in Xu Rong's hand, swallowing the pills and warm water into her stomach.

She wanted to get better quicker. It was already a problem to be transmigrated as a child, she was sick on top of it, there was even less chance for her to be able to do anything.

But while it was easy to get sick, it was not easy to recover from sickness. The more she wanted to get better, the more it wouldn't get better. She slept another day away. It was already night time by the time she woke up. She felt something furry by her face. She turned around and looked to discover that there was a little teddy bear on the bed.

"Your mama just came back. She did not wake you up because she saw that you were sound asleep." The table lamp was on, Xu Rong was sitting in the middle of light and darkness, holding a little bowl in her hand. Ning Ning heard the sounds of a spoon stirring a liquid. "You must be hungry, have some food first...then take your medicine after."

Eat, medicine, sleep, then another day passed by.

Seven days later, Ning Ning laid on the bed while hugging the little teddy. She looked at the ceiling and asked, "What day is today?"

The sounds of a spoon stirring a liquid rang out by her ear along with Xu Rong's voice, "Twenty fifth of August."

A corner of Ning Ning's eyes twitched.

It had already been seven days.

Even if she was a child, even if she was sick, but it was only a flu, why did she sleep for so long? And once she fell asleep, she could not wake up at all. She frequently woke up during the day and at night alternatively... Was that how a child's flu worked?

It was already the twenty fifth of August, there were not many days left until September! How was Yu Sheng? Did Yu Sheng look for her?

A mountain of questions swirled in Ning Ning's mind, she struggled to get out of bed.

"Hey, stay still, stay still, you are sick." Xu Rong stopped her from the side. "Quickly lie down, I will bring you any food or toy you want."

"I want Mama!" Ning Ning pointed to the table across the room, on the table was a telephone.

"Your mama is at work, she has to earn money to buy teddy bears for you, so you cannot disturb her." Xu Rong said with mild and affectionate words in an attempt to dispel those thoughts from her mind. "Be good and take your medicine then wait for Mama to come back, ok?"

"Not ok!" Ning Ning wilfully used a child's ace in the hole—snitching, "I'll tell Mama, you don't let me call her!"

Xu Rong had no choice, she could only help her give Ning Yu Ren a call.

The phone rang a few times, Ning Yu Ren answered, "Hello?"

"Mama," Ning Ning said as she held the receiver, "I miss you."

"Be a good girl." Ning Yu Ren softened her voice, "Mama is working right now, I will play with you in a few days, ok?"

After a few days, the cow would have come home already!

"I want to go see you." Ning Ning said.

"That won't do. You're not feeling well, how can you be out and

about?" Ning Yu Ren rejected her.

Feeling the eyes behind her, Ning Ning was getting a little anxious. Everything else could wait, but she had to leave the house first and foremost. "I want to go out in the sun, I can recover that way!"

Ning Yu Ren considered it for a moment before she said, "Give Nanny Xu the phone."

Xu Rong answered the call and said yes repeatedly, then gave the receiver back to Ning Ning.

"You can only go out for an hour." Ning Yu Ren said gently, "After you are done standing in the sun you have to be a good girl and go home."

"I will!" Ning Ning answered.

An hour was too short, it was not even enough for her to go to the crew.

Was Yu Sheng even at the crew right now? She might have been brought away by Pei Xuan already.

Ning Ning thought about it when Xu Rong was helping her change her clothes. By the time Xu Rong walked out of the house with Ning Ning in her arms, she had already decided. Ning Ning pointed slightly to the right and said, "I want to go to Central Park! I want to look at birds!"

She did not actually want to go to Central Park, she just wanted to head in that direction.

An hour was too short, it was not enough for her to go look for Mama at the filming location, it was also not enough to look for the Mu siblings, it was only enough for her to visit a place—Pei Xuan's house!

Chapter 95

95: Precognitive Dreams

Ning Ning would of course not walk into the enemy's hands voluntarily.

She did not intend to meet Pei Xuan, the one she wanted to meet was Yu Sheng.

At this moment in time, Yu Sheng had most probably been taken away by him. Moreover, based on Pei Xuan's typical controlling nature, Yu Sheng would most probably be kept by his side. He would educate her, cultivate her, monitor her, then manipulate her...just like what had happened to Ning Ning back then.

But of course whether Ning Ning would be able to meet Yu Sheng or not would still depend on luck.

Fortunately, Ning Ning's luck that day was very good.

"It's you!"

A familiar voice rang out beside her ear.

Ning Ning turned her head and looked in the direction where the voice came from as she hugged Xu Rong's neck.

There was a snack bar across the street, a car had stopped at its entrance. At first only a man with a crew cut got off the car to smoke, but upon seeing Ning Ning, another person got off the car as well. That person was none other than Yu Sheng.

The crew-cut man shouted (something) from behind her. She stopped in her tracks and whispered a few words to him.

Ning Ning did not know what she had said to him, but the crew-cut man stayed and smoked at the entrance of the snack bar, while she quickly crossed the road to approach Ning Ning.

"Big Sister Yu Sheng." Ning Ning shouted in a cute manner.

"I've changed my name to Lian Lian." Yu Sheng smiled. "Here, call me Big Sister Lian Lian."

Ning Ning looked at the man with a crew cut across the road, then looked back at Yu Sheng, "You cannot change your name."

Yu Sheng was surprised, she asked, "Why?"

"Because I dreamt of you yesterday." Ning Ning said.

Yu Sheng immediately fell silent.

"...What was I doing in your dreams?" She forced a smile after a long while, looking at Ning Ning with expectation, hoping to hear something good from Ning Ning.

But Ning Ning stared at her and said, "I dreamt that you died."

A chill rose from Yu Sheng's feet, rushing through her bones, she could not help but shiver on the spot. She looked at Ning Ning. The other was but a little girl who was as cute as a glutinous rice dumpling, but for some reason she looked scarier and scarier.

Absent-mindedly, Yu Sheng felt like she had returned to the studio —no, not the studio, she felt like she had stepped into < < Dreams of the Future > >. The one standing in front of her was the female lead character, looking at her naively, using her young and tender voice to convey the news of her death...

She was virtually a crow in human form.

"It's just a dream." Yu Sheng shut her eyes tight, then opened them and forced a smile. "I will not die..."

"But you were hit by a car, there was a lot of blood." Ning Ning pointed at the man with a crew cut across the road, "That uncle stood by your side and shouted Lian Lian at you..."

"Enough!" Yu Sheng shouted, stopping Ning Ning from saying anything further.

That was as much as she had wanted to say. Ning Ning drew back, seeming like she had been frightened by Yu Sheng's shout. She pursed her lips, turned around and hugged Xu Rong's neck. Then she started to sob.

Xu Rong frantically patted her back. She coaxed Ning Ning as she said to Yu Sheng, "You're already grown up, why are you bullying a child?"

"I want to go home," Ning Ning whimpered, "I want Mama."

What needed to be done was already done, there was no need to stay there anymore. If Yu Sheng believed her, then she would begin to think of a way out, of how to get away from the identity of Lian Lian. If she did not believe her...then she would get hit by a car and turn into a vegetable. The next time they met, she would most probably

believe her words more..

"There, there, we'll go home now." Xu Rong coaxed Ning Ning as she turned around and walked in the direction they came from.

She hadn't even taken a few steps when a loud crash rang out behind her.

Xu Rong exclaimed from shock. She turned back and her eyes slowly widened.

A traffic accident had just occurred on the road, Yu Sheng who was just alive and kicking a moment ago, was now lying in the middle of the road, fresh blood was spreading under her body.

The crew-cut man tossed his cigarette to the ground and rushed towards her, shouting repeatedly, "Lian Lian! Lian Lian!"

There were chaotic footsteps, a crowd flocked towards the scene, women were screaming, children were crying Xu Rong stared at the scene dumbfoundedly for a long time before she turned her head slightly to look at the child in her arms.

"What did you say to her just now?" Xu Rong tried to carefully confirm with her, "You said...she will get hit by a car, there was a lot of blood?"

She was unable to get an answer from Ning Ning.

Because Ning Ning looked like she was frightened from what was happening, she did not say a word on the way back. After they got home, she continued to hug her teddy bear in a daze.

"How did this happen?" Ning Ning hugged the bear tightly and thought, "The accident was brought forward? Moreover, if I remember correctly, she had accidentally driven onto a tree, how did it turn into getting hit by a car when she crossed the road? Was it...was it because she lost focus after she heard what I said, that's why she didn't pay attention when she crossed the road... Damn it, how is she now? She wouldn't die right?"

"Ning Ning..." Xu Rong's voice rang out from across the room.

Ning Ning looked up, the other party actually took a step back.

They looked into each other's eyes, the mood was a little awkward.

"Take your medicine first." Xu Rong forced a smile, then reached out with medicine in hand.

Ning Ning looked at her. She reached out and took the medicine

out of her hand, putting the medicine in her mouth under Xu Rong's supervision, then gulped a cup of water down. She waited for Xu Rong to take the empty cup out of the room before she opened her mouth and spat the pill out onto her hand. She pulled down the zipper on the back of her teddy bear and shoved the pill in before she pulled it back up.

Afterwards, she did not go anywhere as she continued to pretend to sleep with a blanket on.

Ten plus minutes later, the door opened silently.

A hand slowly reached out to Ning Ning. First, it gently touched her face, then undid her braid before it started to comb her hair.

This hand was so gentle, Ning Ning could not help but start to doubt herself, "Was I being overly suspicious?"

After Xu Rong was done combing Ning Ning's hair, she stood up and walked to the telephone.

"Hello." Ning Ning heard Xu Rong's voice ring out, "It's me... Ning Ning just fell asleep. Yes, yes... Don't worry, I will take good care of her. That's right, can I talk to Xiao Yu?"

"Good girl Xiao Yu! Did you listen well to Auntie Ning?"

"Is acting fun?"

"This is an opportunity Little Sister Ning Ning gave you, you have to act well, understand?"

...

Ning Ning listened to the phone call quietly.

This was not a long phone call, after ten or so minutes, Xu Rong hung up.

Next, she left the room. Not long after, the sounds of cooking rang out.

When it was time to eat, she sat by the bed and woke Ning Ning up. She said gently, "Ning Ning, it's time to wake up and eat, you can sleep after you eat."

Ning Ning rubbed her eyes. She looked like someone who had just woken up, looking at Xu Rong in a daze for a long time, then she muttered, "I just dreamt of your daughter."

Xu Rong's eyelid visibly twitched.

"You haven't even met her, how would you dream of her?" She forced a smile.

"Her name is Xiao Yu." Ning Ning said.

Xu Rong stopped speaking, her eyelids stopped twitching as well. She stood up suddenly from the bed, looking down at Ning Ning. The silence and this method of looking at something brought out a strong sense of oppression.

"Did you wake up and hear what I said?" She suddenly asked with a smile.

If Ning Ning was actually a four-year-old child, she would probably tell the truth after such a scare. But Ning Ning was not. She was an adult, and an actress on top of that.

First, she shook her head blankly, then started to choke up as if she was maligned, "I didn't. I had a dream. I dreamt that Xiao Yu called you, on her...woo, woo,...on her, was my costume..."

She cried for a good while before Xu Rong brought her into her arms and gave her some pats to coax her.

"There, there, there, I believe you." Xu Rong coaxed.

"I don't want to sleep anymore." Ning Ning went along and hugged Xu Rong's neck, saying distressfully, "I have weird dreams lately."

The hand that was patting Ning Ning's back froze.

"...Alright." After a while, Xu Rong smiled. "You don't have to sleep if you don't want to."

Ning Ning thought: "Then I would have to trouble you to feed me less of that flu medicine."

Maybe she was being overly suspicious, she thought that her sleep schedule had been abnormal recently. Initially, she suspected that Xu Rong had overdosed her on flu medicine.

Adults would sometimes do these kinds of silly things; they would give a child a few more pills thinking that a child was seriously sick, thinking that this would help the child recover. However, medicine is thirty percent poison, taking more would not actually help the body.

Of course, Ning Ning had also seen news of nannies who fed their employers' children sleeping pills so that they can laze around...but Xu Rong took care of her for so long, she was a warm memory from her childhood, Ning Ning simply could not imagine her doing such things.

After her meal, sure enough, Xu Rong did not feed her medicine again.

Ning Ning remained awake until night time.

"Good night." Xu Rong switched off the table lamp. She bent down and gave Ning Ning's forehead a kiss.

Ning Ning did not know if she was imagining it but Xu Rong's lips felt very cold.

"Good night." Ning Ning said to her before she closed her eyes.

She lied previously, even after sleeping for so long, she had not dreamt once.

But on that night, she had a dream.

She dreamt of the poster at the entrance of Life Theater.

As it was a dream, the poster began to spring to life.

Xu Rong was holding the little girl's hand as they happily walked under the trees. As they walked, she plucked pretty clothes to put on her, a cute hat to put on her head, packets of french fries, sticks of popsicles, the image was that of a mother bringing her child to Disneyland.

But Ning Ning's vision slowly shifted down.

She realised that she had previously overlooked something.

The roots of the trees.

Those fairytale-like trees were deeply rooted in red soil. However, upon closer inspection, it was not soil at all, but a red piece of cloth.

The red cloth was on top of a person.

Those roots were embedded deeply into this person's body.

Ning Ning reached out in an attempt to take off the cloth, to take a look at who was the person underneath.

But the instant she reached out, she woke up.

The alarm clock by the bed indicated it was four in the morning.

"Huff, huff..." Ning Ning laid on the bed, her hand was still in the motion of trying to grab something.

She shifted her hand towards her bedside cupboard and switched on the table lamp.

The table lamp lit up and shone on her body. Ning Ning looked down and exclaimed.

On her was a red blanket.

"I said, why does this look a little familiar..." Ning Ning murmured as she looked at her surroundings.

The coat hangers high above her had two dresses and a hat, the dress and the hat, she had seen them on the trees of the poster. The remaining ones were also in her wardrobe.

In that instant, Shi Zhong Tang's warning rang out by her ear.

"Be careful of the people around you."

Chapter 96

96: Acting Prodigy

Bring-your-loved-ones-to-work Day.

Ning Yu Ren was a little restless.

"Ning Ning is coming to visit today, right?" Her assistant laughed as they massaged her shoulders. "That's right, has she recovered from her illness?"

Ning Yu Ren cracked a smile upon hearing the first half of what her assistant said, but after hearing the second half, she sighed deeply.

"Not yet," she said, "I originally wanted to act with her as a mother-daughter duo. She fell sick at a really bad time. Sigh, initially I only wanted Xiao Yu to substitute her for a few shots, by the looks of it now, she has to permanently substitute her now... Eh? When did you arrive?"

A slightly plump woman was standing outside the door, it was Xu Rong.

"I've just arrived." Xu Rong said while grinning, she entered while holding Ning Ning who was sleeping soundly in her arms.

Seeing the state Ning Ning was in, Ning Yu Ren's heart ached but she had to show some tough love. She got up and poked Ning Ning's cheek, "Lazy little pig, it's time to wake up."

"...Mama." Ning Ning opened her eyes.

Ning Yu Ren smiled as she brought Ning Ning into her arms. At this moment, Xu Rong rubbed her hands and smiled in embarrassment. "It's rare for me to come here, I want to take a look at Xiao Yu, I've not seen her act before."

"Sure, go ahead." Ning Yu Ren smiled blandly.

Xu Rong and the assistant went out one after another, leaving Ning Yu Ren and Ning Ning in the rest area.

The moment they left, Ning Ning immediately raised the teddy bear in her arms towards Ning Yu Ren.

"What's the matter?" Ning Yu Ren smiled as she took it out of her

hands. "You don't like this one? You want to change it to another one?"

Ning Ning shook her head. "Look behind."

Ning Yu Ren flipped the teddy bear over then was shocked.

The zipper on the back was open, revealing the snow-white cotton wool on the inside. Upon closer inspection, there were quite a lot of colourful items hidden within the cotton wool. She took one of them out—it was a pill.

Ning Yu Ren was furious. She grabbed Ning Ning and spanked her. "I was wondering why you were taking so long to recover, you threw away all the medicine!"

Ning Ning held her butt and hid from her. "I'm not sick anymore, why do I have to take medicine?"

Ning Yu Ren chased after Ning Ning for quite a while right up until someone knocked on the door a few times. "Ning *Jie*1, your scene is coming up."

"Got it, I'll be right there." Ning Yu Ren answered, then turned her head and told Ning Ning, "Come along, look at how the others act."

On the set, a group of children was in the midst of a film shoot.

"That is Xiao Yu, she's the daughter of your Nanny Xu." Ning Yu Ren said beside Ning Ning's ear. "She is about the same age as you, but she can take hardships. She would memorise lines when we told her to, she would act as whatever we told her to, unlike you, who would cry if we didn't give you sweets, cry after memorising a few lines, cry after standing for too long, cry even when you were sitting down..."

That was a little girl sporting a ponytail. She looked slightly older than Ning Ning. Her skin was a little tan and a little yellow, it was not as fair and cute as Ning Ning's skin, but she was also not as delicate as Ning Ning. She looked a lot more mature than children her age.

She walked past a group of children with her head down. Behind her, that group of children was pointing at and talking about her.

"Wa! It's the jinx!"

"What's a jinx?"

"My mother said that whoever talks to her will die, she is like a crow that announces someone's death. How about it? Do you dare to talk to her?"

"I don't dare to."

"I do!" A little boy hopped off the fence he was sitting on, his white shirt fluttered in the air like the wings of a bird. After he landed, he caught up to the little girl in front of him within a few steps. He reached out and seized her ponytail, tugging it viciously, forcing her to turn back to look at him.

"That is Chen Shuang He, he's acting as the male lead character in his childhood." Ning Yu Ren continued to whisper by Ning Ning's ear, "Look carefully at how he acts, he has been publicly acknowledged by the crew as an acting prodigy."

Ning Ning looked at Chen Shuang He.

Was he seven or eight years old this year? He was already a beauty in the bud at that age; there were almost no flaws on his skin and his facial features, his eyes had an air of haughtiness—the haughtiness of someone who had never lost before. His haughtiness made him stand out among the children, leaving a deep impression on people.

But what left a deeper impression was his acting skills.

Xiao Yu smiled at him the moment she turned around.

Chen Shuang He was shocked, then quickly let go of her ponytail like he was repulsively throwing something dirty away. "Why would you smile, how disgusting!"

Xiao Yu was still smiling, walking towards him as she smiled.

"Stop smiling!" Cheng Shuang He pushed her to the ground.

Xiao Yu fell on the ground. She continued to smile at him as she looked up at him.

The situation in front of him was too weird—no, it was the girl in front of him that was too weird. Chen Shuang He could not help but take a step back, but behind him were his playmates. He was a little scared, but he was even more afraid of getting looked down upon by his friends, thus he shot a foot up and gave the schoolbag beside Xiao Yu a swift kick, then turned around and ran away.

"I dreamt of you yesterday." Behind him, Xiao Yu shouted at him, "You said you like me."

"Ptooeey!" Chen Shuang He turned his head and spat.

"It's true," Xiao Yu said, "that's what the future you told me."

"Cut!"

After the director shouted, everyone looked at him.

"That's still not good." He touched his chin. "Again."

Chen Shuang He had a look of indifference, but the other children were reaching their limits. The youngest one of them pouted and started crying out loud all of a sudden. The moment he started crying, the others started crying as well, the set was a huge mess. The parents and the staff members around tried to coax them frantically with whatever means necessary, there were also people who told the director in a straightforward manner, "They are but kids, the standards you require of them are too high, it's alright as long as it's passable."

"The others can be just passable, but she cannot." The director pointed at Xiao Yu and said, "You do it again."

Xiao Yu was taken aback, she then walked in front of him and obediently started to act her part repeatedly.

"That will not do."

"That's wrong! I've told you, the reasons for your three smiles are all different, so you cannot smile the same way each time. How would you do it specifically? Here, show me..."

"Redo!"

"Redo..."

"Go cry at the side, come back and retry after you are done."

The director did not even go easy on the child of an established actress like Ning Ning, naturally he would not go easy on someone like Xiao Yu. Xu Rong brought her daughter away with heartache. She wiped her tears for her then said a few words into her ears before pulling her in front of Ning Ning and asked humbly, "Ning Ning, can you teach Big Sister Xiao Yu how to act?"

Ning Ning looked up at Ning Yu Ren.

"She acts a lot better than Ning Ning, why are you asking Ning Ning to teach her?" Ning Yu Ren smiled.

"Ning Ning has acted in a lot of movies, she is a lot more experienced." Xu Rong said with a smile, "She's also under your influence, she must have learned a lot from you. My Xiao Yu does not have the same kind of good fortune. Right, Xiao Yu?"

Xiao Yu looked at Ning Yu Ren, her gaze showed that she held Ning Yu Ren in great esteem.

She was not here to get help from Ning Ning, she was here to get help from Ning Yu Ren.

Ning Yu Ren seemed to be moved by her expression. She once ran around a few crews, she had also once desired to be able to watch other people perform, she used to look at great actresses with such yearning; Xiao Yu reminded her of herself. Just as she was about to give some pointers, a little boy's voice suddenly rang out.

"Just teach her why don't you."

After he finished speaking, Chen Shuang He was already right in front of Ning Ning. He grabbed her hand and pulled her as he ran to the set, ignoring her wishes. When they passed by the group of crying children, he looked at them and blew a whistle. "All of you get up, it's time to play a game."

Those crying children were like puppies that saw a ball, they all got off the floor and chased after Chen Shuang He.

"Let me introduce myself, I am Chen Shuang He." Chen Shuang He smiled at Ning Ning. "You don't have to introduce yourself, I know you, Ning Ning."

He gritted his teeth as he said the last two words.

He let her hand go and left her at her original spot, returning to the side of the group of children, Without anyone's help, he hopped up onto the fence. The children below surrounded him, looking at Ning Ning maliciously.

If their maliciousness from before were exaggerated, their maliciousness now were...real, the maliciousness of children when they intend to prank someone.

"Wa! It's the jinx!"

"What's a jinx?"

"My mother said that whoever talks to her will die, she is like a crow that announces someone's death. How about it? Do you dare to talk to her?"

"I don't dare to."

"I do!" Chen Shuang He let out a laugh as he hopped off the fence. He was like an eagle that had locked on to its prey, spreading its wings out to swoop in on it. He caught up Ning Ning within a few steps and reached a hand out towards her.

Ning Ning had worn pigtails today. He grabbed one of them with so

much force that it immediately came loose.

That was so painful! Ning Ning glared at this bear of a child with rage. Was he like this since he was a child?

Chen Shuang He looked at her with glee. The other children had also crowded around them thinking it was funny; waiting for her to cry, to give up. Ning Ning had to put up with such looks for half her life, she was already numb towards it, but she could not help but freeze when she saw Ning Yu Ren in the corner of her eyes.

Ning Yu Ren looked at her with a look of expectation and nervousness, it was a look Ning Ning missed.

"Mama..." Ning Ning muttered.

How long have you left me? When you were still around, have I ever made you proud? Was I a disgrace to you?

I would always fail, always give up, always cry, I would even vent at you hysterically. Now I've finally succeeded. < > was met with great response. I want to show you all the reviews and news that were praising me, so that you would not be nervous or disappointed at me anymore. I want you to smile with relief.

But I could only print them and read them out loud in front of your grave.

"Hey, little brat who could only cry and ask for your mommy." Chen Shuang He loosened his grip.

One of the pigtails was undone, only one was still intact. Ning Ning slowly turned around and looked at him, the rage on her face disappeared the moment she saw who he was. She suddenly smiled like she was greeted with a pleasant surprise, like a child opening a present and seeing something they wanted the most.

Chen Shuang He was shocked. He reached out and shoved her, "Why would you smile, how disgusting!"

He had used too much force. Ning Ning tumbled on the ground before she got up and gave him a hug.

Facing the little girl who was running towards him, Chen Shuang He shoved her again without an expression on his face.

Ning Ning fell to the ground again, but she quickly got up and ran towards him again.

In the midst of the heckling of the other children, Chen Shuang He shoved her once again.

However, she was like a roly-poly. She would get up every time she fell down, then rush towards Chen Shuang He tenaciously. Her smile was so funny, so pure; she looked like a monkey trying to scoop the moon out of the water, a child trying to grab Santa's bag, no matter what she had to hug him.

"Stop smiling!" Cheng Shuang He was a little annoyed.

"Ahhhhh!!" Ning Ning was also a little annoyed. This time, she was not going to hug him. She ran at him fast and furiously instead, headbutting Chen Shuang He's stomach like a calf.

The two children immediately fell into a heap.

"I dreamt of you yesterday." Ning Ning said as she pulled his hair. "You said you like me."

"Ptooeey!" Chen Shuang He spat as he pinched her face.

"It's true." Ning Ning said as she was pulled away by a staff member. "That's what the future you told me."

"Not unless the future me is blind!!!" Chen Shuang He shouted as he was pulled away by a staff member.

"Cut!"

The crowd looked at the director in shock.

The director clapped softly, then turned his head to look at Ning Yu Ren. He said half-jokingly, "I still like this brat more, how about we get her back for this role?"

Xu Rong and Ning Yu Ren trembled at the same time.

"...I'll ask her first." Ning Yu Ren brought a dishevelled Ning Ning to the resting area in her arms. Ning Ning seriously thought that Ning Yu Ren was going to ask her to, but in the end, at the moment the door was closed, Ning Yu Ren took a deep breath, then, "...Hahahahahahaha!!!"

Ning Ning, "..."

Quickly check if the door and windows were locked. A movie empress like her laughing without a care for her image would leave a bad reputation on her for life if she were seen.

Ning Ning originally wanted to check the doors and windows, but Ning Yu Ren pulled her back, raised her in the air and spun her around.

"...Are you that happy?" Ning Ning could not help but ask.

"But of course!" Ning Yu Ren brought her into her arms. She placed her forehead on Ning Ning's with tears in the corners of her eyes. "My daughter is a genius, of course I'm happy!"

"I'm not a genius." Ning Ning paused, then swallowed the words that followed.

Even if it was just once, she wanted to be the pride of Mama while she was alive.

"...If only you had acted in this scene earlier." Ning Yu Ren sighed. "Then even if we had to wipe your snot every minute, the director would have insisted on using you."

"It won't work now?" Ning Ning asked.

"...There are still a lot of other opportunities for you, but Xiao Yu only has this one opportunity." Ning Yu Ren touched Ning Ning's head as she laughed gently. "Nanny Xu has lived with us for so long. Even if she is not part of our family, she could be considered half a family member. Ning Ning, let's give this opportunity to your Big Sister Xiao Yu, alright?"

"Okay." Ning Ning nodded.

Even if Ning Yu Ren did not suggest it, Ning Ning would have rejected the chance to act in this movie. Because, the reason for her being here was not to turn herself into a child star, it was for her to make up for the mistake she made in the previous movie—she wanted to make it up to Mu Gua.

"Good girl." Ning Yu Ren kissed her again. "Alright, Mama should go back to work. I will tell the director about you. Do you want to stay and watch Mama or go home?"

"I will go home," Ning Ning said, "I want to watch cartoons."

She actually wanted to take a look at Mu Gua and Mu Er's house.

"Deal." Ning Yu Ren said, "I'll get Nanny Xu to send you home."

Xu Rong was waiting outside the door. She looked to be preoccupied and somewhat unhinged, like a family member waiting outside an emergency room, waiting for the announcement from the doctor.

Ning Ning called out to her a few times before she came back to her senses. She seemed to have fully revived after she got a hold of what Ning Yu Ren was saying. Afraid that Ning Yu Ren would change her mind, Xu Rong hastily said, "Yes, yes, yes, I will bring her home right

away."

Watching Xu Rong frantically leave with Ning Ning in her arms, Ning Yu Ren could not help but shake her head. She turned around and immersed herself into work again.

She was very professional, she would forget herself once she immersed herself into work. She would not take breaks, she would only lie down on the sofa in the resting area deep into night and tell her assistant, "I'll sleep for ten minutes, wake me up later."

She was exhausted, it almost seemed like she fell asleep instantly.

Her assistant pulled a blanket over her out of care. However, before the blanket could be pulled up to her chest, Ning Yu Ren suddenly opened her eyes and sat up on the sofa.

"What's wrong?" Her assistant asked.

Ning Yu Ren slowly turned her head around and used a very weird expression to look at her assistant. She asked, "What date is it today?"

"Third of September." Her assistant answered.

"Where is this?" Ning Yu Ren continued to question.

"It's the set." Her assistant said.

"Set? What set?" Ning Yu Ren pursued the matter further.

Her assistant was simply dumbfounded by her questions. "The set for <<Dreams of the Future>>. Ning Jie, what's the matter with you? Have you not fully woken up?"

Ning Yu Ren ignored her, all she did was to mutter, "<<Dreams of the Future>>..."

Her eyes brightened, she pulled the blanket off her and hopped off the sofa, then ran to the dresser and picked up the teddy bear that was placed there.

She flipped the teddy bear over and pulled the zipper down to reveal the pills hidden inside.

Even though she had just seen them a few hours ago, Ning Yu Ren's expression while looking at them now was no longer expressionless, it was filled with a bone-piercing chill.

"...Where is Xu Rong?" She slowly turned back and looked at her assistant. "My daughter...where is Ning Ning?"

The assistant felt chills running down her spine when she saw the

look on Ning Yu Ren's face, she answered very carefully, "Didn't they go home? You were the one who told them to go home."

"Me?" Ning Yu Ren was stunned, she muttered, "That's right, it was me who told Xu Rong to bring her home..."

Remorse, rage, pain, despair; boundless emotions swept Ning Yu Ren up like a whirlpool. She suddenly grabbed the telephone on the table and dialed a number.

The phone call connected after it rang for quite a while, a man's voice rang out from the other side of the call.

"My daughter is in trouble." Ning Yu Ren said coldly, "You have to help me...because she is also your daughter."

1Jie is a translation for the word elder/big sister, it's commonly used as a suffix for a girl or woman that is slightly older than you or is your senior at your workplace or school.

Chapter 97

97: Let Me Look For Her

This was not the way home.

Ning Ning looked out of the window of the car, "Where are we going?"

Xu Rong, "..."

The last rays of sunlight faded out outside the window. Afterwards, streetlights and car headlights started to light up, lighting up the streets of dusk, Xu Rong was holding Ning Ning as they sat in a taxi. She slowly looked down and said, "Didn't you want to go out and play?"

Ning Ning was stunned.

"Where do you want to go?" Xu Rong smiled. "I'll bring you there."

Ning Ning hesitated. She did have a lot of places that she wanted to go to. For example, Friendship Bistro, Nineteenth Secondary and the hospital Chen Ju stayed in to name a few... It was already the third of September, had Friendship Bistro been burned down? Had Mu Er dropped out of school? Had their mother been taken to the hospital?

Just as she was hesitating, the taxi driver abruptly stepped on the brakes, causing both of them to lurch forward.

"What's wrong?" Xu Rong asked after she sat back up.

The taxi driver wound down the window then reached his head out to take a look. He answered, "There's a traffic accident in front of us."

A lot of cars had stopped in the middle of the road, horns were honking continuously. Between the honking of the horns were the angry shouts and complaints of the drivers.

"Someone died?"

"No one died. One car rear-ended the other, blocking off the road."

"One of the cars seems to belong to a quite famous director and a famous actor onboard..."

"Famous actor? Who?"

A car door suddenly flung open. Xu Rong walked out of the car with Ning Ning in her arms. They weaved through the cars. Ning Ning held onto Xu Rong's neck. She looked back at the road that was slowly getting further as they walked away, the cars that had stopped were forming a crooked line that looked like a snake, it wriggled and wriggled...

"Come to think of it, there was also a traffic accident the last time we came out, I don't even know how that little lady is doing now." Xu Rong said into Ning Ning's ear, "Ning Ning, can you really dream of the future?"

Ning Ning turned her head to look at her.

The streetlights and headlights were shining on Xu Rong's face in symphony. She smiled, as if wearing an ostentatious smiling mask as she asked, "Have you ever dreamt of your Big Sister Xiao Yu? Can she become an actress in the future?"

"She is an actress now." Ning Ning answered her, then pointed in a direction. "I want to go there."

The place she pointed to was something like a farmer's market. There were quite a lot of old and broken down private houses nearby, the streets were lined up with a number of street stalls; there were cheap clothing and toys, fruits and vegetables. Now that the sun had set, the stall owners had already started to pack up, giving up their spots to the people who were there to sell night snacks.

Ning Ning directed Xu Rong to bring her to a restaurant.

To be more specific, the ruins of Friendship Bistro.

White smoke seemed to still be visible above the broken tiles and dilapidated walls, swaying in the air, seemingly broken.

Coincidentally, someone walked out of the ruins at this moment. Ning Ning grabbed him and asked, "When did this place burn down?"

"It just burnt down a few hours ago." The other person answered.

Ning Ning acknowledged it then pursued the matter further, "Who is so bad to burn down someone else's house?"

"It's the kid from this house," the person complained, "he burned down the house while trying to cook, my house was almost caught up in it too."

...It was Mu Gua.

Ning Ning looked back at the ruins.

She looked at the place that used to be called Friendship Bistro.

"This is the history I have altered." Ning Ning thought, then inspiration struck her. If this was history that she had altered, wouldn't that mean...the Mu Er now, could possibly not be the real Mu Er, but Ning Ning transmigrated as Mu Er?

Was that possible? Ning Ning licked her lips, if it was really possible, then, would there be anyone else who was more trustworthy and reliable as an ally than herself? She turned her head to look at Xu Rong and said, "Let's go."

After Friendship Bistro burned down, the siblings Mu Gua and Mu Er had lost their home; they could only temporarily stay with a relative, but it was impossible to rely on their relatives to let them stay permanently; that was why Mu Er went out looking for jobs all night. She would find a job at a restaurant tonight... Ning Ning arrived at a restaurant named Jade Rabbit.

"Welcome," the staff bowed, "little girl, are you here alone?"

Alone?

Ning Ning turned her head and discovered that no one was behind her, Xu Rong—who had been following her—had disappeared.

"Little girl?" The staff looked at her with an inquisitive expression.

Ning Ning looked back at him and said coquettishly, "My father is inside."

"Do you want me to bring you to him?" The staff asked.

"No." Ning Ning shook her head, opened up her short little legs and walked into the restaurant. "I will look for him myself!"

It was dinner time, the restaurant was crowded, almost every table was filled with dishes and surrounded by people. Ning Ning walked past table by table, her vision was not on the customers by the tables, but on the staff members.

She attempted to look for a familiar face among the staff members.

A person walked by, then another in the other direction, her head turned along with the pairs of legs that were walking in front of her. Suddenly, a man's voice rang out from behind her slowly in a lazy manner, "What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for someone." Ning Ning answered reflexively, then her body froze. She slowly turned her head around.

Behind her was a pair of big and long legs, towering in front of her like pillars. Her vision went up along the two legs—a lean waist, broad shoulders, and finally a familiar face...that would always appear in her nightmares!

He squatted down in front of her—an urbane face, a pair of gold-framed glasses reflecting the light. He smiled and said to her, "What a coincidence, I am also looking for someone."

"...Mama said, I cannot talk to strangers." Ning Ning looked away, her heart thumped. *Why would Pei Xuan be here? Who is he looking for? Is he here to look for Mu Er too?*

Based on the timeline, it seemed plausible.

Yu Sheng had had her accident brought forward. Pei Xuan, now more than before, would need a replacement to act as the rich little miss in his plans. How could he let the Mu Er, whom he met at the hospital when she was visiting her mother—who also looked exactly like Yu Sheng—go?

Did Pei Xuan tail her from the hospital? Would that mean that Mu Er is nearby right now?

Ning Ning's eyes started to wander, she tried her best to look around for Mu Er's figure.

She did not find Mu Er, but found another familiar face.

"It's you!" She walked towards the other party, "Why are you here?"

Chen Shuang He turned around to look at her, his little suit did not fit in with the rest of the people. Ning Ning looked behind him...there was another person who did not fit in with the rest of the people.

Chen Shuang He did not come alone, behind him was his father, Chen Guan Chao. The father-son pair were both wearing handmade suits with expensive ties, not a strand of their hair was out of place. They looked like they were going to attend a movie festival, not to have dinner at such a commoner's restaurant.

"You think that I want to come to such a place?" Chen Shuang He said grumpily, his vision shifted to Pei Xuan. "...Why is it you again?"

Ning Ning was stunned. "You two know each other?"

"Me and my father were originally on our way to watch an opera, our car was hit by this person midway." Chen Shuang He said with a little rage, "Now, we cannot make it to the opera on time, we can only have dinner here before going home."

So they were the ones who got rear ended earlier.

Ning Ning looked at Director Chen then looked at Chen Shuang He, they matched. A quite famous director would naturally refer to Chen Guan Chao, as for the famous actor...Chen Shuang He was definitely the hottest child actor at the moment. If you were to switch on your television, he would be the child version of the male lead on any show, any channel.

"Let's go." Director Chen finally said after staying silent for a long time, "Let's eat somewhere else."

Ning Ning was taken aback. She glanced at Pei Xuan who was behind her, then followed them out of the restaurant in a hurry.

The three of them had to flag a taxi because of the traffic accident. Once they got in, Chen Shuang He placed his hands behind his head and called out to Director Chen who was sitting in the front, "Father, who were you talking to on the phone just now?"

Director Chen ignored him.

Chen Shuang He was inviting a rebuff, he turned around and complained to Ning Ning, "A woman called my dad just now, he was too busy talking to her to notice a car driving onto us..."

"Shut up!" Director Chen shouted at him.

"Am I wrong?" Chen Shuang He flared up. He used all his might to kick the back of Director Chen's seat with his leather shoe. "Can you face Mother?"

"Enough!" Director Chen got angry as well, he turned back and shouted, "Do you not see that there are other people here?"

"You didn't hear anything!" Chen Shuang He looked towards Ning Ning tearfully and obstinately.

Ning Ning immediately covered her ears with her hands, indicating that she didn't hear anything.

Chen Shuang He snorted. He touched the tears on his face. After an instant of embarrassment, he told Ning Ning ferociously, "...Close your eyes! You didn't see anything!"

Ning Ning obediently closed her eyes, indicating that she didn't see anything.

But the taxi was only that big, her hands did not have noise-cancelling capability either. They were still arguing loudly, so Ning Ning heard everything no matter if it was something she wished to

hear or not. She vaguely found out that Director Chen did not seem to have a good relationship with his wife. Compared to his home, he would rather spend time on the set; compared to his wife, he would rather look at the various actresses on the set.

The young Chen Shuang He only chose to be a child star because it was the only way he could see his father who would always be away from home, it was the only way he could talk to his father...

The taxi suddenly came to a halt.

"We're here," Chen Guan Chao said, "you can get off now, your mother is here to fetch you."

Ning Ning opened her eyes to find out that the taxi had already stopped at the doorstep of her house. A woman had rushed out of the door and ran towards her.

"Mama!" Ning Ning had just got out of the car when she heard someone shushing from behind her. She looked back and only saw a screen of tail gas, she coughed lightly twice as she looked at the taxi pulling away. She did not understand why they had seemed to have left in a defeated manner, but upon thinking about it carefully, she understood. After all, she had just heard the private affairs of their family, it would be awkward for them to look at her now.

Then, she was lifted up by someone. Ning Yu Ren hugged her tightly, as if she was hugging a treasure that was returned to her.

"Mama..." Ning Ning felt a little guilty, she even started to consider coming clean about everything to Mama. Mama would definitely understand, Mama would definitely help her...

"Oh God, thank God, Ning Ning you are finally back." Xu Rong ran out from the side at this moment, wiping her tears as she said, "How did you get lost while we were walking about? I was scared to death. I was just discussing with your mother whether to call the police..."

"...There's no need." Ning Yu Ren said blandly, "I will bring her to her room to rest, she is a little shaken."

After she finished speaking, she brought Ning Ning back to the house herself. Xu Rong froze behind her for a while before following Ning Yu Ren back in frantically. She said repeatedly on the way in, "I know it was my mistake this time, you trusted me enough to let me take care of your child yet I lost her, but I guarantee that this will be the last time, really..."

"Last time?" Ning Yu Ren muttered, then she closed the door behind

her, leaving Xu Rong outside of the bedroom.

Xu Rong paced up and down outside the door. She started to choke up and cry in a low voice as she paced around.

"Mama..." Ning Ning was a little suspicious. She was even a little afraid of the Ning Yu Ren she saw in front of her.

She held Ning Ning with one arm, her other hand was by her mouth. She bit down hard on the back of her hand and gave out the gnawing and whimpering sounds of a beast. It seemed like she could only control herself by doing this, allowing herself to remain calm temporarily and not go crazy.

Upon hearing Ning Ning's beckoning, Ning Yu Ren suddenly came back to her senses. She loosened her jaw, the ferocity in her face faded. She turned and looked at Ning Ning with a smile, "Don't worry, Mama is fine..."

Ning Ning held Ning Yu Ren's other hand in front of herself, teeth marks were left on the back of her hand, it was even bleeding. Ning Ning looked up at Ning Yu Ren's face, she was smiling, there was a little blood at the corner of her lips.

"Mama, what's with you?" Ning Ning murmured.

From what she remembered, as an actress, Mama cherished her body, because the screen would magnify a person's flaws infinitely. She did not allow herself to gain weight, she also did not allow herself to have any obvious scars on her body.

"Don't be afraid, Ning Ning. Mama will not hurt you." Ning Yu Ren touched Ning Ning's cheek with her bloody hand, saying with a smile, "Anyone who wants to hurt you, Mama will...get rid of all of them."

Chapter 98

98: Medicine

"Anyone who wants to hurt you, Mama will...get rid of all of them."

What did that sentence mean?

Like a dream, on the next day, Ning Yu Ren had reverted to what she was usually like—noble and elegant, graceful and poised, she had even forgiven Xu Rong. She held up Xu Rong who was almost kneeling in front of her as she said with a smile, "Forget about it this time, never again."

"Thank you, thank you." Xu Rong cried as she covered her mouth, "Then, Xiao Yu...can she continue to act?"

"Of course." Ning Yu Ren smiled, "She has nothing to do with this."

Xu Rong breathed a sigh of relief, Ning Ning on the other hand were having goosebumps.

Because Ning Yu Ren was acting.

She was acting as her own usual self—every facial expression, every move—they were seemingly flawless, other than the wound hidden by her gloves, the scab on the back of her hand.

Just before she left the house, Ning Yu Ren hugged Ning Ning and whispered into her ear, "Don't worry, she would not dare to lose you for a while."

Ning Ning abruptly wanted to do something, but Ning Yu Ren quickly let go of her. She gently caressed Ning Ning's cheek with a gloved finger, then she walked out of the door with a smile.

The smile on her face disappeared the moment she got into the car.

"Hello." She gave a certain person a call. "Did you receive it?"

Outside the car window, Ning Ning and Xu Rong came out of the house, Xu Rong was holding Ning Ning's school bag in her hand, waving at Ning Yu Ren from a distance. Ning Yu Ren waved back at her while maintaining her smile, but her tone was cold, "Help me investigate what that medicine is exactly."

After they watched the car leave, Xu Rong told Ning Ning who was

beside her, "Alright, it's time to go to school."

Ning Ning held onto the last strand of hope and asked, "Can I not go?"

Of course not, she was four years old as of now, the age of someone who was supposed to attend nursery.

Ning Yu Ren put a great emphasis on Ning Ning's education. She originally studied in the best nursery, furthermore, she was a member of the dance team. She was recently rehearsing a dance titled 'Dance of the Duckling'.

A few little girls were in yellow fluffy dresses, wearing paper duck bills on their mouth. They tossed their heads and tails in a silly manner on stage... Ning Ning was expressionless during the entire process for what felt like an eternity.

Ning Ning finally made it through the school day, but Xu Rong was already waiting by the school gate.

Maybe she was trying to make up for her past mistake, or maybe she was trying to redeem her own image in Ning Yu Ren's eyes, she had started to obey the rules again. Xu Rong woke up conscientiously every morning to send Ning Ning to school on time, ensuring that she picked Ning Ning up from school on time in the afternoon. She accompanied Ning Ning to watch cartoons and do homework on schedule at night.

She would only be willing to bring Ning Ning out to play on the weekends or when there was not much homework.

Sometimes they would go to the zoo, sometimes they would go to the playground, but no matter where they went, whenever they were on the way home, Ning Ning would drag her to the same place for food.

Jade Rabbit Restaurant.

They ordered a tableful of dishes. Ning Ning ate without paying much attention to the food, her eyes were locked on the staff members who were walking about. That wasn't her, that wasn't her either...she could not find Mu Er again today.

"You really like the food from this restaurant." A man's voice rang out from behind her. She turned back and saw Pei Xuan taking a seat at the table beside hers. "Can we put our tables together?"

Ning Ning's instinct told her to shake her head, but she nodded eventually.

A waiter handed Pei Xuan the menu. He did not look at it, listing off a few dishes like it was on the back of his hand instead, before returning the menu to the waiter. "Alright, that's all."

"Uncle." Ning Ning looked at him. "Do you always eat here?"

"That's right." Pei Xuan smiled. "Uncle really likes the food here as well."

The waiter left with the menu, the mobile phone on Pei Xuan's waist suddenly rang, he apologised and answered the phone.

"It's me," Pei Xuan said, "it's nothing much, I just want to ask if you are free in the near future, I have a person that I want you to teach... That's right, it's the things you are good at, make up, coordinating clothes, etcetera..."

The dishes he ordered were already served when he got off the call.

"Try this." He gave a pig-shaped steamed bun to Ning Ning. "Cream custard bun, children love these."

She found it hard to reject in the moment, Ning Ning could only take a bite out of the steamed bun.

It turned out to be really delicious!

A plate was pushed towards her, full of custard cream buns. Looking at Pei Xuan's seemingly smiling face, Ning Ning suddenly thought that the steamed bun in her mouth started to taste bad...

It was a good thing that Pei Xuan did not bother with Ning Ning anymore after he gave away his steamed buns. He turned around and started to have a conversation with Xu Rong instead. Within a few sentences, Xu Rong had told him her age, her family situation and her monthly salary. *Good Lord, why aren't you working in multi-level marketing scheme?*

Xu Rong could not bear to bid him farewell as they went their separate ways. When she went to fetch Ning Ning from the nursery on the next day, she even proactively asked whether Ning Ning wanted to go out to play and eat.

"Don't wanna." Ning Ning shook her head with disinterest.

They didn't have to go there anymore.

Pei Xuan's phone call proved that he was already a step ahead of her and had already taken Mu Er away. Next, Crossdresser Li, no, Teacher Li would go to his house to guide Mu Er. His lessons were in a semi-enclosed style, she would be at Pei Xuan's house from eight in

the morning to seven or eight in the evening. In this period, Ning Ning would be locked in his house for more than half the time.

She was already unable to meet Mu Er at Jade Rabbit Restaurant anymore.

The last place where she would be able to meet the Mu siblings would be the rented apartment they live in right now.

"I could say that I like the food for going to the Jade Rabbit Restaurant." Ning Ning thought, "A rented apartment...what reason could I have to stay there in the middle of the night?"

She thought about it on her way home.

There was a car parked in the courtyard, Ning Yu Ren had returned.

"Mama." Ning Ning opened the door. She looked around but could not find her slippers, so she ran barefooted towards the living room.

Ning Yu Ren was seated on the sofa in the living room, holding her head up with one hand as she leaned to one side of the sofa. A copy of a script was on her legs, beside her laid a little girl who was sound asleep.

Ning Ning walked past the little girl and recognised who she was, "Why is Big Sister Xiao Yu here?"

"Shh, don't wake your Big Sister Xiao Yu up." Ning Yu Ren shushed her. She reached out to bring Ning Ning into her arms then smiled at Xu Rong who was walking towards her with Ning Ning's schoolbag in hand. "Xiao Yu has been exhausted recently. She has caught a little flu and fever, I gave her the leftover medicine you fed to Ning Ning."

The school bag fell to the ground with a thump out of Xu Rong's hand, the look on her face changed drastically. "Which bottle?"

"I forgot," Ning Yu Ren said, "I took a bottle at random."

Xu Rong frantically turned around and walked in her room hastily. There was a big wooden cabinet in her nanny room which was filled with different kinds of common drugs—fever medicine, flu medicine, cough syrup, iodine, Yunnan white medicine¹ powder and bandages—they were available in all kinds of variety.

She pulled open the glass door of the cabinet. In front of her was a row of flu medicine, there were all kinds of brands, arranged in a slightly messy manner, looking like someone had just messed with it. A trace of anxiety flashed across Xu Rong's face. She parted the

pillboxes in front of her and reached out to the deepest part of the cabinet, feeling around before she finally breathed a sigh of relief.

The instant she turned around, she saw Ning Yu Ren standing behind her with Ning Ning in her arms.

"What's wrong?" Ning Yu Ren smiled like she usually would. "Is there a box of flu medicine that should not be taken in there?"

Xu Rong exclaimed, sweat was rolling down her temples.

"Look at you, sweating so much." Ning Yu Ren said to Ning Ning, "Ning Ning, do you bring a handkerchief?"

The nursery would inspect their handkerchiefs everyday, Ning Ning naturally had one on her. She took out a handkerchief that had her name sewn on from her pocket. Ning Yu Ren said gently by her ear, "Help your Nanny Xu wipe her sweat."

Her young and tender fingers pinched the handkerchief as she slowly wiped Xu Rong's forehead.

"Nanny Xu and I were primary school and middle school classmates, the two of us grew up together. I tried to make a living for myself one step ahead of her, she started looking for a job one step behind me. Even though we have not met in many years, we never stopped writing to each other, we even promised each other in our letters." Ning Yu Ren smiled gently as she held Ning Ning. "She would treat you well, and I would also treat Xiao Yu well."

She was clearly smiling so gently, as she usually did, like the Virgin of the Rocks², but Xu Rong started sweating from her forehead even more.

"Mummy..." A weak voice rang out from outside the door.

Xu Rong turned around and looked at the door, "Xiao Yu, how are you feeling?"

Xiao Yu rubbed her eyes, walking over drowsily. She tugged at Xu Rong's sleeve, "I am a little sleepy and a little hungry."

"Children are all like that, they would feel sleepy after taking flu medicine." Ning Yu Ren said with a smile, "Alright, you should quickly cook, don't let Xiao Yu go hungry."

Xu Rong looked at Ning Yu Ren with guilt for a while before leaving with Little Yu in tow. The mother and daughter pair went to prepare the meal together. On the other hand, Ning Yu Ren went back to her room with Ning Ning in her arms. There was still a while before

mealtime, Ning Yu Ren laid out a stack of drawing paper on the table, then took out Ning Ning's twenty-four colour crayons and placed it by the side.

"Ning Ning." She sat by the table and placed Ning Ning on her legs, her voice rang out from behind Ning Ning's neck. "Before our dinner, let's play a game."

Ning Ning turned around and looked at Ning Yu Ren. "What game?"

Ning Yu Ren opened the box of crayons and took out the black crayon. She started drawing on the paper.

"This is you." She first drew a small person, then added a hat on the small person with a yellow crayon. She drew a bigger person beside the small person, the bigger person had long hair, it was a woman.

She swapped to another piece of paper, on that piece of paper she drew a long set of tracks, she wasn't sure if the tracks were not in use yet or if it was abandoned, there was no train, there was no one around, there was only weed.

Ning Yu Ren added a few strokes of green on the paper, then used the white crayon to continuously colour it.

It looked like it was snowing heavily.

"Ning Ning," she asked as she drew, "if someone were to leave you here, what would you do?"

"I will find someone to help me." Ning Ning said.

"But what if there was no one nearby?" Ning Yu Ren said, "Look, it is snowing so heavily."

She coloured ferociously on the paper with the white crayon. Her stroke was getting faster and heavier, finally with a rip, the paper was torn, underneath the crayon was a black hole.

Ning Yu Ren did not speak.

Ning Ning did not speak either.

Honestly, she felt a little creeped out. She could not help but grab onto Ning Yu Ren's thumb. "Mama...why is your hand so cold?"

Ning Yu Ren's finger was very cold, like a frozen corpse, it suddenly shuddered when held by Ning Ning's soft fingers. After a moment, she carefully closed her fingers, like she was holding an illusory snow that would melt anytime.

"NingNing..." She hugged Ning Ning tightly from behind. "Don't

worry, Mama will protect you, this time Mama definitely would not let you..."

1Yunnan Baiyao (or Yunnan Paiyao; simplified Chinese: 云南白药; traditional Chinese: 雲南白藥; pinyin: Yúnnán Báiyào; lit.: 'Yunnan White Drug') is a proprietary traditional Chinese medicine marketed and used as an alternative hemostatic product with use in both human and veterinary alternative medicine.

2The Virgin of the Rocks (Italian: Vergine delle rocce; sometimes the Madonna of the Rocks) is the name of two paintings by the Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci, of the same subject, with a composition which is identical except for several significant details.

Chapter 99

99: Track

The place on the drawing truly existed.

Ning Ning looked at the abandoned tracks in front of her. There were no trains and there was no one around, there were only weeds. With a gust of wind, two little white flowers in the middle of the tracks were swaying gently.

"Do you remember the way here?" Ning Yu Ren placed both her hands on Ning Ning's shoulders while standing behind her.

Ning Ning shook her head.

"Then we will redo the walk." Ning Yu Ren said with a smile.

It was a rare holiday, a rare occasion where Ning Yu Ren did not have to film, but the two of them ultimately did not go to the park or the playground, they didn't even go for ice cream or cake. The time was spent on the road. Ning Yu Ren drove Ning Ning to the suburbs, to the abandoned tracks in front of them.

Once was not enough, they came back two to three more times.

"Do you remember now?" Ning Yu Ren asked.

"Yes." Ning Ning said.

"Can you walk out of here alone?" Ning Yu Ren asked again.

This set of tracks had been abandoned for quite a long time. Year after year, day after day, the road that used to be here had already been drowned in weeds. Cars could not come in, one had to get off a car and go on foot through lush vegetation before they could find this set of tracks.

"Yes." Ning Ning answered. They went in and out two to three times, Ning Yu Ren even made markings on the trees with a knife. Even if she just relied on these markings, Ning Ning would be able to find a way out. She just had a little doubt, what exactly did Mama bring her here for?

"Good girl." Ning Yu Ren patted her head with a smile, then slowly turned her head around to look at the abandoned tracks.

What did she see on the tracks?

It caused her so much fear, unacceptance, sadness and rage.

"Let's go." Ning Yu Ren suddenly gave Ning Ning's back a pat. "You go ahead, Mama will follow you from behind to see if you can walk out of here on your own."

"Ok!" Ning Ning nodded. She started walking as she looked back at Ning Yu Ren, not understanding if this was a game or if this was training. The possibility of this being a practice might be bigger, because the moment she took a wrong turn, Ning Yu Ren would drag her back to the tracks and make her redo it. This time, Ning Ning did not dare to deliberately go the wrong way, she stopped from time to time and looked at the markings on the tree. After half an hour, she finally walked out and saw the main road outside, their private car parked on it.

"Good job!" Ning Yu Ren clapped her hands. The mobile phone on her waist rang, she picked it up. "Hello."

"I had people investigate the composition of the medicine you gave me last time," a man's voice rang out, "the results are out."

"What is it?" Ning Yu Ren asked with a smile.

"It's part flu medicine and part sleeping aid." The other party said.

"Alright, I understand." Ning Yu Ren continued to smile. The smile was like the forest behind her, dark and gloomy, hidden inside were countless dangers which could not be seen with the naked eye.

At the same time, in Ning Yu Ren's house.

Xu Rong was preparing a meal in the kitchen when the door opened behind her.

"Xiao Yu, come taste this..." Xu Rong had scooped up pieces of soy-braised pork, she turned around and frowned. "...What is with your clothes?"

Xiao Yu was standing at the door, wearing a brand new red dress. She held the edges of the dress and smiled. "Mummy, do I look nice?"

"Change out of that quickly." Xu Rong bade as she looked in the direction of the door. "They will be back any minute now."

The smile that was originally on Xiao Yu's face slowly disappeared. She looked down and mumbled, "I don't want to wear her old clothes."

"...Mummy will buy new clothes for you when I get my salary." Xu

Rong turned the stove off and turned around, then pulled Xiao Yu back to the room to change out of the clothes—she put on Ning Ning's old clothes and socks carelessly on Xiao Yu.

Although they were said to be old clothes, they were actually given away once they were but worn only a few times, they didn't look any different from new clothes.

But Xiao Yu was still dissatisfied, she longed for the bright and beautiful red dress she just changed out of, she told Xu Rong, "Mummy, I don't want to go back to primary school anymore."

"Shh." Xu Rong quickly interrupted her, "How many times must I tell you? Don't mention that you are already attending primary school, you have to say that you are six years old, you are still attending kindergarten."

"What does it matter?" Xiao Yu pouted. "There's no one around anyway."

Xiao Yu looked a little older than Ning Ning, but that was not the reality. She was already eight-and-a-half going to nine years old this year, because she developed later and her birth was registered later, so she was only six years old to the rest of the world, fitting right into the criteria for the little female lead of < < Dreams of the Future > > .

"Mummy is afraid that you will get too complacent and let it slip during important occasions." Xu Rong sighed again and brought Xiao Yu into her own arms.

Xiao Yu snuggled in her arms and said gently, "Mummy, I really don't want to go back. I want to stay here and be like Auntie Ning, to be an actress."

"What's good about being an actress?" Xu Rong wrapped her arms around Xiao Yu's shoulders with tender affection. "You chanced upon this opportunity because it so happened that Ning Ning fell sick, Your Auntie Ning and I have a good relationship, that was why you can substitute for her, but this kind of opportunity usually only happens once..."

"Can't Ning Ning fall sick a few more times?" said Xiao Yu, unwilling to take it lying down, she looked up at Xu Rong. "Mummy, I really want to act."

Xu Rong fell silent.

"I want to be an actress like Auntie Ning, I want to be rich like her." Xiao Yu's eyes slowly turned red. "This way I won't have to wear

someone else's old clothes, you will also not need to work for someone else. We will live in a big city and never have to go back, never have to get beaten by Daddy and Grandma."

Xu Rong almost teared up as she listened to Xiao Yu. She hugged her and said, "Alright, I will beg your Auntie Ning later to get her to think of a way for you to continue acting."

"Ok!" Xiao Yu kissed her cheek happily.

For the sake of her request, Xu Rong put in all her efforts to make a lunch full of color, fragrance and taste. The mother and daughter pair sat by the table anxiously as they waited for a long while, waiting until the food on the table almost went cold. They received a call from Ning Yu Ren saying, "I have matters to attend to here and won't be back for lunch, the two of you can go ahead and eat."

"What's the matter?" Xu Rong asked carefully.

"Nothing much, it's a personal matter." Ning Yu Ren said vaguely, "Let's leave it for now, bye bye."

As the call ended, Xu Rong looked at the receiver in her hand with a complicated expression and thought: She wasn't like this before.

The relationship the two of them had were closer than what it seemed. The two of them had grown up together, had gone to school together, they had continued to remain in contact even after they went their separate ways. Compared to Ning Yu Ren who was slowly making a place for herself in the world, Xu Rong's situation was not as good. She was married off early, but was unable to get pregnant. She was scolded and beaten by her husband and mother-in-law. She did all the dirty work. She had finally gotten pregnant, but it was a girl, so the both of them were beaten and scolded together. Xu Rong told all of this to Ning Yu Ren, Ning Yu Ren pitied her and let Xu Rong work for her.

So Xu Rong was not just a nanny, she was also Ning Yu Ren's listening ear.

Although Ning Yu Ren was rich, she experienced a lot of stress from her career. There were things she wanted to complain about, things she was sad about that she wanted to talk about. She would not talk about them to anyone, but she would do so to Xu Rong. Recently, however, for some reason, Ning Yu Ren had suddenly stopped complaining to Xu Rong, not telling her anything.

"...Don't tell me I've been found out?" Xu Rong could not help but shudder as she thought of that possibility.

"Mummy, when is Auntie Ning coming home?" Xiao Yu shouted at her from where she was seated by the table, "I'm starving."

"Auntie Ning said she is not coming back, you can start eating first." Xu Rong answered. Although her stomach was gurgling, she had no time to eat. She walked briskly back into her room, opened the medicine cabinet and took out the little bottle that was hidden in the deepest part of the cabinet.

"It was just a moment of folly..." Xu Rong looked at the bottle and muttered, "I just thought that, as long as Ning Ning recovers later, Xiao Yu would be able to act in the entire movie... She, she has such a strong desire to act..."

She shoved the bottle that was held in her hand into a pocket on her clothes, then returned to the living room to have lunch with Xiao Yu. Xiao Yu was still young, she was also starving, so she was concentrating only on eating. She did not notice that Xu Rong was distracted and was forcing a smile.

After lunch, Xu Rong brought Xiao Yu back to her room for a nap. She gently sang a lullaby until Xiao Yu fell asleep. She lowered her head and kissed Xiao Yu on her forehead, then held tightly onto the bottle in her pocket and left the house.

The bottle in her pocket was not flu medicine, they were sleeping pills.

Xu Rong did not even dare to throw this bottle into the bin by the entrance of the house. She took a bus and did not even alight after a few stops, she only got off the bus at the final stop. She scanned her surroundings, looking for a place where she could dispose of the bottle.

In the remote suburbs, there was not even a bin in sight. However, there was no need for one. Even if she were to toss the bottle into the grass by the road, it would quickly be lost in the midst and not be found by anyone in a long time.

Just as Xu Rong was about to take the bottle out and toss it, a few people suddenly came out of the vegetation in front of her.

She quickly put the bottle that she had taken halfway out of her pocket back in. She walked to the station entrance, pretending like nothing had happened, as if she was just waiting for the bus.

The few people also walked towards the bus station, she could only make out that it was a family once they got close. The father was holding a little boy in his arms and spanking him repeatedly. "Little

brat, who told you to run about? Who told you to run about?"

The little boy would not stop crying, his mother looked heartbroken at his side, saying, "We finally found him, don't beat him up too much."

"But I have to say, this place is truly desolate. If it was not for the sake of looking for him, I would not have known that the forest was that deep and that there would be a set of abandoned tracks within." The eldest sister said.

"It's a good thing it's still summer, he's fine even after getting lost for half a day. If it had been in the winter, he might not have made it back." The second sister said.

"Touch wood! Let the spirits not hear what u just said since u didn't mean it! You quickly knock on wood three times!" The mother said angrily.

A bus drove over, the family went up the bus one by one. The bus left the station, leaving Xu Rong alone.

She watched as the bus left, then walked towards the vegetation the group of people had emerged from. It was a rough walk, a tree branch got stuck in her hair. Xu Rong forcefully broke a few branches, simply throwing the broken branches on the ground and stepped over them with a crunch.

"Even an adult would have a hard time walking around here, not to mention a child." She mumbled before stopping in her tracks.

In front of her were a set of abandoned tracks. There were no trains, there was no one around, there was only weeds. With a gust of the wind, two little white flowers gently swayed in the middle of the tracks.

For some reason, as she looked at the set of abandoned tracks in front of her, she mumbled the sentence she just heard repeatedly, "It's fine to get lost in here for half a day in the summer, if it had been in the winter, one might not make it back."

Chapter 100

100: Snow

Mama was acting too weird.

Ning Yu Ren spent half a day teaching Ning Ning how to walk out of the forest. When she got home that night, she smiled at Xu Rong at the dinner table and said, "Director Chen called me today, he wants to start filming a new movie immediately with Ning Ning as the female lead."

Xu Rong was surprised. "As the child version of the female lead?"

"No, it's the female lead herself." Ning Yu Ren said, "This movie is titled < <Agent Stay-home Dad> >, depicting the story of a retired special agent and a little girl. It's going to be the New Year comedy film for the year. The lead actor is Guo Cheng Dong, there will also be cameos from quite a number of big stars, like Qiao Yue Hua, Xie Xin..."

She listed off seven to eight of the hottest stars at that time, finally saying with a laugh, "But after I thought about it, I should reject this for Ning Ning."

"Why?" Xu Rong looked at her, confused. "This is such a good opportunity."

"Because she's not old enough." Ning Yu Ren turned around and looked at Ning Ning who was sitting beside her. "The female lead for this film is at least seven or eight years old, she is but four."

Xu Rong and Xiao Yu glanced at each other. After dinner, Xu Rong quickly washed the dishes then knocked on the door to Ning Yu Ren's room, the two of them discussed something in the room with one another.

Ning Ning sat in her own room and played with a Rubik's cube, looking at the door from time to time.

There was indeed a film titled < <Agent Stay-home Dad> > in history, it was indeed a New Year movie. The director was really Director Chen, there was also definitely a number of cameos from big stars, but the lead actor was an eight-year-old boy, named Chen Shuang He...

Mama lied to her, but why?

The door was suddenly flung open, Ning Yu Ren walked out of the room.

Ning Ning tossed the Rubik's cube in her hand aside as she called out, "Mama..."

She did not know what to follow up her call with.

The Ning Yu Ren in front of her felt too unfamiliar, Ning Ning could not help but think, "Was Mama like this in the past?"

Lying without blinking, harming herself, smiling everyday, but never truly smiling. She was completely different from the Ning Yu Ren from Ning Ning's memory. She seemed to always be in pain, to be tired, as if she had just struggled to crawl out from Hell.

"What's the matter?" Ning Yu Ren sat by Ning Ning's side, touching her hand ever so gently. At this moment, she was like Mama from Ning Ning's memory again.

"...What did Nanny Xu tell you?" Ning Ning asked.

"She asked me for help, to help Xiao Yu get the role of a female lead." Ning Yu Ren smiled as she asked, "I rejected her, guess what she did next?"

"Was she very sad?" Ning Ning asked.

"No, she was angry." Ning Yu Ren, "She said I had previously promised to help her, to help Xiao Yu."

Ning Ning was speechless.

"Tell me why that person is so weird. I helped her so much, but she remembers none of it. The one time I rejected helping her, she got so mad, as if I owed her or something." Ning Yu Ren shook her head and smiled at Ning Ning. "Forget it, let's not talk about her. Ning Ning, do you want to go out and play recently?"

"Play where?" Ning Ning asked.

"At Mama's friend's place." Ning Yu Ren said, "He loves children, especially when you are still this cute. If you were to ask anything from him, he would give it to you. If you wanted to go play, he would be willing to bring you anywhere."

"Is Mama's friend a boy or a girl?" Ning Ning asked out of curiosity.

"A boy." Ning Yu Ren answered.

This was very serious. Ning Yu Ren was well-known for not getting along with people in the circle. She had very few friends, and even fewer male friends. Someone who was close enough to her for her to be willing to let them babysit... Ning Ning asked carefully, "Is it Papa?"

The smile on Ning Yu Ren's face froze. She asked after a while, "Ning Ning, what kind of papa do you like?"

Ning Ning felt 囧1, "I can choose?"

Ning Yu Ren, "Let's hear it."

Ning Ning had no choice after Ning Yu Ren urged her on. She could only count her fingers as she listed them out, "Handsome, tall, good personality, loves his wife and children..."

As she started to list more and more qualities, the more she felt that that person was not like that.

If that person was truly that good of a person, Mama would not have left him and he wouldn't have ignored the two of them for so many years. Ning Ning was fine, she had Mama to love her, but who would be there to love Mama?

"...Forget it." Ning Ning reached out and hugged Ning Yu Ren. "I don't want anything else, all I want is for him to rush over to you when you need him..."

At the same time in another room, Xiao Yu was also hugging Xu Rong. She looked at her expectantly, "How did it go?"

Xu Rong sighed. "She didn't agree."

"Why?" Xiao Yu looked at her with astonishment. "Didn't you tell her that I'm already eight this year?"

"I did." Xu Rong said, "But it was no use."

"How could this be..." Xiao Yu muttered, then her mouth trembled and she started crying.

"Hush now, don't cry." Xu Rong patted her as she coaxed Xiao Yu in her arms. As she tried to coax Xiao Yu, she herself started to tear up. She said sadly, "If only I did the same back then, if only I had also left home to become an actress. We were similar back then. If I had entered the show business, I wouldn't have been much different from her either...that way I would not have to beg her."

"Why did you not leave home?" Xiao Yu sobbed as she looked at Xu Rong with a trace of grievance.

"It's my fault that I was too timid when I was young, I was not adventurous enough..."

A night passed.

The next morning, Xu Rong apologised at the dining table, saying that she was being too rash the previous night. Ning Yu Ren accepted her apology graciously. The two of them were childhood friends, they buried the hatchet (instantly), at least on the surface level.

After that, a car brought both Ning Yu Ren and Xiao Yu to the crew. Xu Rong on the other hand brought Ning Ning to school. Everything reverted back to normal, except for one thing...Ning Ning realised that Xu Rong had been especially attentive to the weather forecast recently. As the days slowly started getting colder, her mood slowly started getting better.

"It's snowing." Xu Rong caught a snowflake in her hand on the way back from school.

Ning Ning looked up at the sky, pale white snow was falling from the cold and gloomy sky.

It was now November of 1997.

It was the beginning of winter.

The two of them were holding hands as they walked down the streets. A young girl in red leather boots walked towards them, stopping in front of a car. The door of the car had opened, Pei Xuan stepped out of the car and stood in her way, "Greetings, Young Lady."

As if it was rehearsed, a group of reporters flocked over and repeatedly took photos of them.

At the corner of the photos, Xu Rong and Ning Ning looked at them like two curious passersby. It was not until when the car had left with the two of them—with the reporters chasing after the car while raising their cameras—that Ning Ning and Xu Rong continued on their way.

"Clearance sale! Supermarket clearance sale!"

The two of them walked past a supermarket which was currently having a sale. It was seemingly filled to the brim with housewives. A youth managed to squeeze his way out after much effort, then bumped into Xu Rong who was at the entrance.

"I'm sorry." The youth turned and looked at them, it was Mu Gua.

He held a bag of eggs in his arms. It looked like he had just got his hands on some discounted items. Just as he was about to leave after

apologising, Ning Ning shouted at him from behind, "Wait!"

Mu Gua looked back.

"You dropped something." Ning Ning bent down to pick up a pair of white gloves.

Mu Gua frantically felt around his pocket, then walked towards Ning Ning and took the gloves out of her hands. He handed an egg to her. "Thanks, little girl."

Ning Ning held the egg and didn't call out to him again.

Because the paper she had long prepared was already stuffed into the glove, waiting for him, or her, to open it and take a look.

"Let's go." Xu Rong told Ning Ning. At the next bus stop, she got on the bus with Ning Ning in her arms.

The scenery outside the window changed continuously, this was not the way home.

"Where are we going?" Ning Ning asked while sitting on Xu Rong's lap.

"We're going to your mama." Xu Rong said with a smile, "Let's have a snowball fight."

At the final stop, Xu Rong brought Ning Ning down the bus, the snow crunched drearily under her shoes.

They passed through the snow covered field and the forest with trees that had its branches bent by the snow. Ning Ning saw a familiar place. An abandoned set of tracks, there were no trains, there was no one around, there was only weeds. With a gust of the snowy wind, the tracks hummed.

Xu Rong let Ning Ning down and said, "Your mama is not here yet, let's wait for her here."

Ning Ning turned her head to look at Xu Rong. "Will Mama really come here?"

Xu Rong's eyes drifted off for an instant, but she quickly smiled and said, "Of course. You're here, why would she not come? Why don't the two of us start first? We can play as we wait for her."

Ning Ning started to smile. Her smile made Xu Rong feel uncomfortable for some reason, it felt extremely like that of her mother.

"Ok, let's play." Ning Ning bent down and picked up a pile of snow,

moulded it into a ball and threw it at Xu Rong.

The two of them went back and forth at each other. After they had their snowball fight for a while, Xu Rong suddenly said with a smile, "Ning Ning, do you feel hot?"

Ning Ning was a little out of breath after running about, she was even perspiring. She watched as Xu Rong walked over and took off her hat and coat. She hung them over her arms and gazed in the direction of the forest. "Why is your mama not here yet? Ning Ning, wait here, I will go over to check."

After she finished speaking, she disappeared from Ning Ning's sight in two to three steps.

The wind was blowing, Ning Ning felt a little cold and sneezed, then she sniffled. She started laughing coldly in the direction Xu Rong left in.

"No wonder Mama wanted me to memorise the way out," she muttered, "it's for this day..."

But how did Mama know that Xu Rong would begin to think about abandoning her here on a winter day?

"Mama...are you the same as me? Did you transmigrate here from the future via a movie?" Ning Ning muttered in a low voice. She opened her stride and ran towards the forest. Luckily, the markings Mama had left behind were still there. She relied on those markings and her memory to finally walk out of the place. The path was originally not easy, it was an even more difficult walk than usual with the snow, she accidentally tripped. Before she could fall to the ground, an arm had reached out from behind her and grabbed her into his embrace. A youth's clear and bright voice sounded, "...Watch out."

Ning Ning looked back.

The white snowy ground, a white coat, a collar covered in white fox fur had enveloped his face like a white angel.

After he helped her up, he picked up the sketchpad he had tossed on the ground. Ning Ning took a glance at it. "It's me?"

"Yes, it's you." The other party placed the sketchpad in front of her.

On the sketchpad was a sketch. By the abandoned tracks, Xu Rong and Ning Ning were having a snowball fight. It was clearly a childlike drawing, but for some reason it emanated a bone-chilling creepiness. The smiles on both people were creepy, especially Xu Rong's. The drawing would not even feel different if the snowball in her hand

were to be swapped with a rock or a knife.

"That's not your mother, right?" He asked from the side.

Ning Ning shook her head, then widened her pitch black eyes and looked at him... He was still as sharp as when he was young, nothing could escape his eyes.

"Let's go." The youth quickly kept his sketchpad and reached a hand out to her. "I'll bring you to your mother."

Holding his hand, Ning Ning looked up to him and said, "My name is Ning Ning."

The other person was taken aback, then he smiled gently. "My name is Wen Yu."

With the sketchpad in one hand and Ning Ning's hand in the other, his figure quickly vanished amidst the snow. Around half an hour later, a black leather shoe stepped on and broke a fallen tree branch. A tall adult man braved the snowy winds to come to the abandoned tracks.

He looked around for a moment before taking out his mobile phone and placing it on his ear.

"Hello, Yu Ren," he said, "your daughter is not here."

1This is a word used as emoticon ("smiley") meaning embarrassed, sad :-), depressed or frustrated

Chapter 101

101: Return Her to Me

"Hello, Yu Ren," he said, "your daughter is not here."

Ning Yu Ren felt faint. Her body swayed, then she fell to the side.

It caused a commotion around her. Her assistant and the director both came running. The director asked worriedly, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Ning Yu Ren forced a smile as she was helped up by her assistant. "Maybe I have been too tired recently, I'll take a short break."

If it were anyone else who had said that, they would definitely be on the end of a scolding from the director, but Ning Yu Ren was different. She was a well-known workhorse in showbiz, it was the same when she filmed < <Dreams of the Future> >. She was almost always on the set. She would wake up at five to memorise her lines every morning, putting in more time and energy than anyone else.

"Go, go." The director waved his hand. "Quickly go lie down in the resting area. Do you need a day off?"

Ning Yu Ren shook her head with a smile, then hurried into the resting area.

She quickly called the person back after closing the door, her voice was anxious. "Did you look around the area?"

"I did, she's not here." The other party answered, "I even had people watching Xu Rong. Ning Ning is not with her either, she went home alone."

Ning Yu Ren hung her head down, her eyes slowly lost their glow. She looked like she had turned into a walking corpse.

"Don't worry." The other person said, "No cars can come in here, you can only walk. It would take ten to twenty minutes to walk in or out, she...or they, could not have gone far."

"...Ok." That was when Ning Yu Ren recovered a little, she said with a trace of earnest hope in her voice, "You have to find her."

"I will." The other party let out a chuckle. "You said it, she is my daughter after all."

After she hung up, Ning Yu Ren leaned on the door and slowly slid to the ground. Her whole body was shivering. She was overcome with emotion and put her left hand into her mouth. Separated by the glove, her teeth were biting down ferociously on the back of her hand.

It was not until the mobile phone in her left hand rang again that she came back to her senses.

"Hello?" She answered the phone frantically, "Did you find her?"

"..." An unfamiliar man's voice rang out after a moment of silence. "Hello, your daughter is with me."

Ning Yu Ren felt faint again, she sat up suddenly. "Ning Ning!"

"Mama." A little girl's voice rang out from the other end. "I'm fine, I got lost, this big brother helped me."

"Got lost?" Ning Yu Ren asked, "What about Xu Rong?"

"She brought me somewhere I don't know." Ning Ning answered, "She said you are waiting for me here. Mama, where are you now?"

Ah, it did happen.

Ning Yu Ren thought as she said gently, "Mama is still on set. Ning Ning, pass the phone to the big brother beside you."

The person on the phone was switched.

"Hello, I am Ning Yu Ren, the actress who acted in <<Person Within the Painting>>." Ning Yu Ren said, "How do I address you?"

"My surname is Wen." The other person paused for a moment. "We've met before. <<Person Within the Painting>> was shot by my father, his surname is Shi, he was the director for <<Person Within the Painting>>."

The world is such a small place...

"...So it's you." Ning Yu Ren murmured. She remembered the past, remembered an old acquaintance. She breathed a sigh of relief, her tense body relaxing. "If it's you, it'll take a load off my mind..."

"Where are you now?" Wen Yu asked, "Should I send her over?"

Ning Yu Ren closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again. "No, don't send her here."

There was a commotion at the other end of the call. Ning Ning shouted for the phone repeatedly and finally snatched the receiver out of his hands. "Mama!"

"Ning Ning, remember the person Mama had mentioned to you before?" Ning Yu Ren said gently, "Mama will get him to pick you up immediately."

"But I want to go to you." Ning Ning said anxiously, "I have so many things to tell you."

Are you also sitting in the audience seat of Life Theater just like me?

Are you really my mama? Or are you someone else?

"...Mama also has a lot of things to tell you." Ning Yu Ren said with difficulty, "But now is not the time. Go with that person first. Once Mama is done dealing with the business I have on hand, I will look for you immediately, alright? Now let me speak to Big Brother Wen Yu."

Ning Ning handed the receiver to Wen Yu unwillingly.

"Your aunt was the person who helped me get my foot into show business, she was also the actress I idolized the most, so I named my daughter after her." Ning Yu Ren said, "For Wen Xiao Ning's sake, do me this favour."

Hearing a name he had not heard in a long time, Wen Yu closed his eyes. "..What do I have to do?"

"Bring her to the bus station nearby... No, better bring her to the nearest gas station, it's warmer there." Ning Yu Ren said, "Buy something for her to eat and drink and wait with her, I will immediately send someone to go fetch her."

"Alright." Wen Yu promised her. "What is that person's name?"

He wasn't sure what Ning Yu Ren had told him, but Wen Yu suddenly froze.

"What's wrong?" Ning Ning looked up at him, "What did Mama say?"

"...Nothing." He hung up and looked at her with a complicated expression for a while, then bent down and held her hand. "Let's go."

The two of them left the phonebooth and walked towards the nearest gas station. The snow was constantly falling, Ning Ning coughed repeatedly as she walked.

Wen Yu sighed again. "You're wearing too little."

Ning Ning wanted to say something, but she coughed again. She was wearing quite a lot when she had left home, but just before Xu Rong left, she peeled her hat and coat off her.

The sound of a zipper opening rang out from behind her. She looked back and saw that Wen Yu had taken off his coat. The white coat that was as long as her entire person wrapped her up from head to toe. Wen Yu knelt down in front of her and pulled the zipper up to her neck, then pulled the hood over her head, the fur surrounded her face.

"Endure it for a little longer." He encouraged her gently.

Ning Ning nodded. Holding his hand, the two of them left two long trails of footprints in the snow. A trail of big footprints, a trail of small footprints.

Half an hour later, at the gas station.

Wen Yu had bought a few bags of snacks from the convenience store at the gas station. He had also requested for two cups of warm water before he returned to Ning Ning.

"Who is coming for me later?" Ning Ning took the cup of water he handed over. She held it with both hands, absorbing the warmth of the cup.

Wen Yu seemed to not have heard her. He looked out the door, distracted. He only came back to his senses when Ning Ning tugged his sleeve. "What did you say?"

Ning Ning could only repeat what she said, "Who is coming for me later?"

"Your mama's...friend." Wen Yu answered with great difficulty.

Ning Ning narrowed his eyes and stared at him. Wen Yu's response was very strange, she probed him further, "What is his name? Do you know him?"

"His name is..." Before Wen Yu could finish, a car slowly approached the entrance.

The two of them looked out of the glass door together.

Ning Ning even could not help but take a step closer.

What Mama said before made her feel, this person that Mama had dispatched was most likely the father she had never met.

She hated him for never showing up in her life, she also hated him for not showing up when Mama was sad and tired. But sometimes, she could not help but hold onto some hope that he had his reasons...

The car door opened, a man walked out of it.

Ning Ning's pupils shrunk and her nostrils flared uncontrollably.

Because the person who got out of the car was... Director Chen!

After Director Chen got out of the car, he chatted with a staff member as he refueled his car. He was looking around his surroundings as if he was looking for something, his vision was even locked on the door.

Don't come in! Don't come in!

Ning Ning quickly hid in a corner and curled herself up, screaming repeatedly in her mind.

Maybe her prayers were answered. Director Chen seemed to be here only to refuel, after his tank was fueled, the staff member pointed him in a direction. He then quickly got in the car and drove off.

Outside the store was too cold, the staff member was rubbing his hands as he walked back in.

"Uncle." Ning Ning walked up to him impatiently. "What did that person say to you?"

"Oh, he's looking for someone." The staff member smiled. "Looking for a little girl roughly your age, but the girl he was looking for is wearing a yellow hat and red coat. I told him that there was a little girl that was dressed up like that in a Santana1 that refuelled here twenty minutes earlier, it drove off in the direction of the city."

Ning Ning did not speak. She grabbed the white coat with both her hands, a section of her pink wool sweater neckline was revealed underneath her white coat.

This was how she was dressed at the moment, but approximately two hours ago, she was sporting a yellow hat, a red woolen coat and white shoes...but now her coat and hat had been taken away by Xu Rong.

After the staff member had left, Ning Ning slowly turned to look at Wen Yu, she smiled with difficulty. "He was not here to look for me, right?"

How could Mama entrust her to Director Chen!

"He loves children, especially when you are still this cute. If you were to ask anything from him, he would give it to you. If you wanted to go play, he would be willing to bring you anywhere."

From the above description, how many does he fit into!

Ning Ning was unwilling to believe that the person Mama had mentioned was Director Chen, but if it was really him...it might explain why Wen Yu had that weird look when he was on the phone.

In <<Phantom of the Theater>>, at the moment when Wen Xiao Ning lost her life, both Wen Yu and Mama had seen Director Chen let out a shout of inspiration with their own eyes after which he sat by the body and wrote his script. He didn't send Wen Xiao Ning to the hospital, he didn't call for help from anyone nearby, it was almost like he was just sitting idly by, watching her die.

Both Mama and Wen Yu had developed an opinion of Director Chen after that incident.

What was different from Wen Yu was that Mama and Director Chen were both in the show business, they had to brush shoulders with each other. If they were to be put together in the same crew, then they could not avoid interacting with each other. If they were close outside of work...then how would Wen Yu be able to take it?

Because, on a certain level, not only was "Wen Xiao Ning" Ning Yu Ren's lifesaver, she was also her mentor who had helped Ning Yu Ren get her foot into the door...

Wen Yu did not answer her, he was looking behind her.

What was behind her?

Ning Ning slowly turned her head around.

A tall man had been standing behind her for an unknown amount of time.

He seemed to have just come in, snow was still on his head and shoulders, a cold chill emanating from his body. He smiled at Ning Ning. "We meet again, little girl who likes to eat cream custard bun."

No!

Ning Ning looked at him and wailed in her heart. *It might as well be Director Chen!*

"Why did you come here alone, where is your mother?" Pei Xuan knelt in front of her and smiled, then he looked up at Wen Yu, "This is..."

"Wen Yu," Wen Yu said coldly, "Yan Qing's student."

Pei Xuan looked like he had never heard of those names. He stood up to shake Wen Yu's hand. "Greetings."

A hand wearing a white glove was holding tightly onto his hand like a handcuff, he didn't let go.

"Do you want to know what happened to Teacher Yan Qing?" Wen Yu said coldly.

"My apologies. I don't know who you are, neither do I know this Yan Qing you mentioned." Pei Xuan's expression did not waver, it even looked like the expression of an innocent man who had been maligned. "You must have mistaken me for someone else."

Wen Yu stared holes into him and smiled. "Even if you were to turn into ash, I would not have mistaken you for someone else."

Then, he let go of Pei Xuan's hand, bent over to pick Ning Ning off the ground and walked towards the door.

"Hold it." Pei Xuan's voice rang out from behind him.

Wen Yu did not stop. He continued to walk out of the door.

"I'm the one Ning Yu Ren sent."

Wen Yu stopped in his tracks and turned his head along with Ning Ning to look at him.

"Might I trouble you," Pei Xuan reached a hand out and smiled politely, "to return the little girl in your arms...to me."

1The Volkswagen Santana is a three-box sedan, based on the second-generation Volkswagen Passat (B2). It was introduced in 1981 while production started in 1984 for Europe and 1985 for China.

Chapter 102

102: Finish What was Started

Looking at Pei Xuan in front of him, Wen Yu's expression changed a few times, but he finally made up his mind.

"I'm sorry, I cannot hand you over to him."

"Big Brother Wen Yu, don't leave me with him!"

Both of them were surprised. They looked at each other, then, at the next second, Wen Yu made off at once with Ning Ning in his arms.

"Hold it!" Pei Xuan shouted and ran after them.

The staff members who were left behind looked at each other in bewilderment, wondering what had happened. As there were no customers, they got together and talked under their breath about what had happened.

As they were gossiping, two more people walked in.

They looked like a pair of father and son. The one walking ahead was slender in stature and feminine, he looked like a woman even though he was wearing a men's suit. The man looked a little nervous as he kept adjusting his tie non-stop. A little boy who was seven or eight years old was by his side, who was also in a new set of clothes, he had both his hands behind his head, looking reluctant.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for someone." The man who looked like a crossdressing woman walked up to a staff member. The staff member was surprised when a man's voice rang out, "Did you see a girl? She looks like...this."

He took out a photograph from his chest pocket. In the photograph was Ning Ning making a heart with both her hands at the camera.

"I did." The staff member took a look at the photograph. "A man brought her here earlier, he bought some snacks and drinks..."

"A man?" The little boy raised his eyebrows, then looked up at the man in the suit. "Father, guess I was right. That woman might have even called a few different men, for example that Director Chen that we just met... You are just one of them."

"Bo Yue, shut up." The man in the suit berated (the boy). He smiled

and asked the staff member, "Where are they now?"

"They ran off." The staff member told him animatedly, "Actually you guys are really not the only people who came looking for someone, let me tell you..."

Wen Yu was very lucky. Midway through running away, a taxi had coincidentally driven towards him. He raised his hand to hail the taxi, then hurriedly got on it with Ning Ning in his arms. He closed the door and said, "To the city."

The car slowly turned around and drove towards the city, leaving Pei Xuan far behind them.

Ning Ning turned her head to take a look.

Through the windows, Pei Xuan was holding both his knees. Like a person who had just hiked up Mount Tai, he was gasping desperately for air...

That middle-aged man had terrible stamina...

On the contrary, although he had run with Ning Ning in his arms, Wen Yu only panted a little in the taxi then turned to ask Ning Ning, "Why do you not want to go with him? Wasn't he a friend of your mother?"

"Because he is a bad guy." Ning Ning looked at him innocently.

Wen Yu was taken aback. "Why did you say that?"

"A big sister told me. She was tricked by him." Ning Ning told him sincerely.

Wen Yu had a grave look on his face. He was originally leaning back on the seat, but he abruptly sat up straight and gazed at her. "Tell me everything."

"It was a big sister named Yu Sheng..." Ning Ning told him the story about Pei Xuan getting Yu Sheng to act as a rich lady once. "Now she is trapped in his house."

Ning Ning did not lie. If Yu Sheng was still alive, then she would be locked in Pei Xuan's attic, pretending not to be able to hear, not to be able to see, to be a vegetable.

Wen Yu closed his eyes while he pondered over something. After a while, he looked up at her and said, "No matter what, let us give your mother a call, so that she doesn't worry too much."

At the next phone booth, Wen Yu told the taxi to make a stopover,

then got off and gave Ning Yu Ren a call.

"I've been told, you took off with my daughter." Ning Yu Ren said.

"Please listen to my explanation," Wen Yu said, "it's regarding Pei Xuan..."

Ning Yu Ren interrupted him, "Can I leave Ning Ning with you temporarily?"

Wen Yu was stunned.

"As a matter of fact, I was clutching at straws and had gotten three people to look for Ning Ning." Ning Yu Ren let out a bitter laugh. "Too many cooks will spoil the broth. If the three of them were to find out what I've done, they probably wouldn't be happy about it, then they would not take care of Ning Ning willingly."

"Can I ask a question?" Wen Yu asked.

"Go ahead." Ning Yu Ren said.

"Why must you leave Ning Ning with someone else?" He looked at Ning Ning who was sitting by his leg. "She is still so young."

"I have something to deal with recently. She's...too young, she should not see these things." Ning Yu Ren let out a laugh. "I'm usually busy with work, I don't have time to make friends. I'm starting to regret it now. Once I've looked around, I could only find a few candidates to look after her...they are not the good kind either. You appeared at the right time, you have the conduct of Director Shi, I am very well aware of that. Can you do me this favour? Can you take Ning Ning in temporarily for a while?"

Ning Yu Ren was known as a person who was hard to get along with in the entertainment industry. She had money, she had fame, she had status, but she didn't have many friends. She also very rarely asked for help. When she asked for help this time, especially in such a sincere manner, Wen Yu found it hard to reject her.

"For how long?" He finally sighed.

"A few weeks, at most a month." Ning Yu Ren said, "Thank you... Finally, can you let me say a few words to Ning Ning?"

The receiver was swapped into Ning Ning's hands. She heard Ning Yu Ren say softly, "Ning Ning, if he asks why your name has the character 'Ning' in it, just tell him it's to commemorate Wen Xiao Ning..."

After the exhortation, Ning Yu Ren hung up. She was standing

alone in the empty resting area. The corners of her lips were curved up, her eyes lit up in the darkness, like a beast that had finally found a chance to take revenge after getting hurt.

"Why don't you turn on the lights?" The lights were suddenly switched on, the director stood by the light switch and asked gently, "How are you? Feeling a little better? Can you continue filming today?"

"I'm fine now." Ning Yu Ren turned her head around. She had reverted to her usual demure as she smiled modestly. "Let's begin filming."

When she walked out of the room and past her assistant, she handed her mobile phone to them and casually gave an instruction. "Help me answer the phone if someone calls from home, tell them that I'm filming."

But she knew in her heart that no one from home would call her until two days later—which was to say until Xiao Yu was done filming—Xu Rong would call her. Xu Rong would then cry in the call, saying that Ning Ning had gotten lost, that she had tried to look for her for a very long time but could not find her...

"Begin!" The director waved the script that had been rolled up in his hand.

Let it begins. Ning Yu Ren closed her eyes and thought.

I have to finish what I've started through Life Theater. I ignored everything else and came to the beginning just so I could correct the mistake I once made.

"Big Brother Wen Yu." Ning Ning stood at the kitchen door and looked at Wen Yu who was busy in front of the stove. "Will you save Big Sister Yu Sheng?"

It was already dark outside, they were currently at Director Shi's house. Director Shi was not around, he was said to be filming a martial arts film at a certain set. They did not have a helper, it was unsure whether Director Shi wanted to train his son or if Wen Yu liked to be independent and self-reliant.

"It's late." Wen Yu turned around. He was holding onto two plates and wearing an apron that had a kitten on it. "Let's talk about it after we eat."

It looked like, for the sake of a child's taste, the dinner for the night was slightly sweeter.

"What else do you know?" Wen Yu placed the red bean steamed bun he was holding with his right hand in front of her. "Do you know where Pei Xuan lives?"

Ning Ning knew, but she did not want to seem to know too much about it in front of him. She wanted to make things more logical, that way, the evidence would be more logical when they were handed to the police.

"I don't know," she said, "I have not met with Big Sister Yu Sheng for a very long time."

"When did you two last meet?" Wen Yu asked.

"It was the twenty-fifth of August." Ning Ning's shoulders shrank in fear. "Then she was hit by a car."

Wen Yu was taken aback, then silently patted her head.

"...But," Ning Ning said, "before she was hit by the car, she secretly gave me a note."

His hand that was patting her head stopped. Wen Yu's voice rang out from above her head, "Where's the note?"

"She told me to give the note to a little big brother¹." Ning Ning said, "I have already given it to him."

Ning Ning had pushed everything onto Yu Sheng, she could not come out to deny it anyway. Besides, if these things were to come out of Yu Sheng's mouth, it would be more reliable than if it were to come out of the mouth of a little girl like her. What she had to do now was to turn Yu Shen into the mastermind behind the scenes, and herself into a messenger...

"What was written on the note?" Wen Yu asked, "Did you read it?"

"I did." Ning Ning looked down in embarrassment, her two legs that were dangling in the air swayed. "But there were a lot of words I couldn't read..."

She wrote every word, she could read every word, but she wanted Wen Yu to bring her and meet up with the person who had the note.

"Then would you still be able to recognise the little big brother who has the note?" Wen Yu asked.

"I would." Ning Ning looked up, "I only gave him the note today, I saw where he lives."

Then, she looked at Wen Yu with expectations, hoping for his next

words to be: "Let's go, we're not eating anymore, bring a steamed bun to eat along the way, it's more important to look for the person."

"It's more important to eat." Wen Yu placed a red bean bun in her bowl with his chopsticks. "We'll look for him tomorrow."

...What do you mean eating is more important?! We wouldn't die from missing a meal! There are only so many tomorrows, if we were to wait any longer, we might be too late!

Ning Ning grabbed the red bean bun and ate it up in two to three bites, then burped in an exaggerated manner and patted her stomach with both hands. "I'm full!"

Then she turned and looked at the clock on the wall. "It's only nine! Let's go out for a walk!"

Wen Yu looked out of the window, snow was fluttering outside...

Ning Ning, "I'm not afraid of the cold!"

Wen Yu looked at her silently. He reached out and opened the window.

Ning Ning, "Cough, cough, cough, cough, cough!!"

Wen Yu closed the window back and locked the snowy winds outside.

"Children shouldn't push themselves." He placed another red bean bun in her hand. "Leave matters in the hands of an adult."

Ning Ning looked at the steaming bun in her hand, then slowly looked up at him.

The once skinny arms had become slender and strong, the once tender shoulders had become broad and stable, the child who had once required her protection was now telling her, "Children shouldn't push themselves. Leave matters in the hands of an adult."

At this moment in time, Ning Ning just wanted to retort... *Yu'er! You think you've grown up! You don't listen to your auntie anymore!!*

In the end, she could not convince him. After their meal, she was dragged into the bathroom to wash her face then off to the bed to sleep. Wen Yu covered her with a blanket then switched off the table lamp. "Good night."

After he left, Ning Ning tossed and turned on the bed, she could not fall asleep at all. At last, she looked out the window with a pillow in hand. The wind was whirring, snow was fluttering down, the world

was clear and sparkling like a snow globe.

She knew that at this moment, in a certain corner of this snow globe, under the lightly falling snow, there was a pair of brother and sister standing under a streetlight, warming themselves with a pair of white gloves.

"Then, who would be the one who reads the note in the glove?" Ning Ning muttered while holding her pillow. "Would it be Mu Gua? Or Mu Er?"

The answer was...Mu Gua.

The next day, Wen Yu went out with Ning Ning.

The snow had accumulated on the streets, the ground was a sheet of white, the roofs was a sheet of white, the world was a sheet of white.

Wen Yu had Ning Ning bundled up tightly, there was even a red scarf wrapped around her face, only her eyes and nose were visible. She held his hand and brought him to an old broken down rented apartment.

Mu Gua was standing at the foot of the building. He seemed to have been waiting for them for some time, some snow had already accumulated on his shoulders.

He looked at Ning Ning's...companion—Wen Yu, raising the note in his hand and saying coldly, "Did you write this note?"

A hand reached out from behind her and took the note out of Mu Gua's hand before Ning Ning could explain.

He brought the note up to his eyes, letting out an exclamation once he had taken a look at it.

"What's wrong?" Ning Ning looked at him with a weird expression.

"Nothing much." Wen Yu smiled. "I just think that this handwriting...is a little familiar."

Ning Ning, "..."

As Wen Xiao Ning, she would act at times, and tutor Wen Yu at others. Those afternoons, with the sun shining bright, she would hug him within her embrace, holding his finger and teaching him how to write, the memory was still vivid up to today.

She did not forget, he did not forget either.

1 Little as in young, big brother as in older than her

Chapter 103

103: Secrets of the Heart

There was only one sentence on the note.

"Your sister is in danger, look for me."

There was an address attached at the bottom.

Mu Gua paced up and down at the written address but did not go in, because it was an area for the rich. If you were to look in the distance, there were only a villa, another villa and more villas.

Which rich man would have the leisure to help solve the problem of a poverty-stricken person like him? He remembered the little girl who was only as tall as his thigh, Mu Gua thought that this was most probably a prank.

But after he returned home, he felt regret.

"I should have knocked on the door and asked around," he thought, "there is nothing to lose by asking anyway."

After tossing and turning in bed for a night, he woke up late the next day.

His sister had already left before him. He put his clothes on and went downstairs. He was originally supposed to go to work at Pei Xuan's house, but for some reason, he hesitated.

"I'm late anyway, might as well not go today." Mu Gua looked down at the note in his hand. "...Shall I go to this place once again?"

He was pacing up and down at the entrance, up until a big one and a little one appeared in front of him.

It was the little girl from the other day.

Mu Gua looked at her...companion—the youth. He laughed coldly. "Did you write this note?"

The handwriting was so mature and proper, it could not have been written by that little girl.

The other party took the note out his hand, looked at the words, then said a few words to the little girl before turning around and looking at him. "Let's find a place to sit down and talk about it."

It looked like he had to take care of the little girl by his side. They sat inside a milk tea shop, the shop was very warm, the air had a fragrance of milk.

"Let's talk." Mu Gua leaned on the sofa once they had exchanged names. He folded his arms and asked, filled with doubt and resistance, "What danger is my sister in?"

The other party took a photo out and placed it on the table, pushing it towards Mu Gua.

Mu Gua picked the photo up. It was a candid wedding photo taken by a guest, the groom in the photo was Pei Xuan, the bride however was a woman he had never met.

"It happened in 1994..." The other party slowly said.

Along with his slow intonation, the year 1994, the story of < <Person by the Pillow> >, was slowly screened in front of Mu Gua like a black and white film.

A spine-chilling story.

A cunning, evil and cold-hearted man who had no mercy even for the person by his pillow.

"Your sister is in grave danger right now." The other party concluded in the end.

"Danger?" Mu Gua started laughing, he remained doubtful. He acted like he was all relaxed and shrugged his shoulders. "The story you just told me, when you get down to it, had happened because of a love triangle. What has it got to do with my sister? She doesn't have that kind of relationship with Pei Xuan, she is only helping him out in exchange for money."

Wen Yu furrowed his brows. It was like Mu Gua had said, this incident was very painful for the people who were directly involved along with their relatives and friends, but from the point of view of a bystander, it was just a tragedy caused by a love triangle. Even up until today, there were still some people who believed that Yan Qing was the one in the wrong and that Pei Xuan was the victim.

"That's it, nothing else?" Mu Gua stood up and said, "Then I'll be leaving now."

When he was halfway out of the shop, someone shouted at him from behind, "Wait."

He slowly turned his head back. The one who had called out to him

wasn't Wen Yu, but the little girl who had been quietly drinking her milk tea from a straw.

"Three days later." She hugged the cup of milk tea and looked at him with pitch black eyes. "Pei Xuan will bring your sister to Lian's family funeral."

Mu Gua looked at her with a ridicule on his face, "That's it?"

"Then," Ning Ning added, "she would bring overtime pay home at night."

Mu Gua sneered and shook his head. "You say that as if it would be true. How would you know what would happen three days later?"

Mu Gua turned around and left after saying that. This time Ning Ning did not stop him, because Mu Gua was very smart. Smart people were very cautious. Compared to what they heard from others, they would rather believe in what they saw for themselves, what they found out for themselves.

"He doesn't believe me now," Ning Ning thought, "but three days later, he will find out that everything I said was true."

But at the same time, there was another issue she had to resolve.

Ning Ning slowly turned her head and looked at Wen Yu who was beside her.

Certain things could be pushed onto Yu Sheng, certain things couldn't. For example, the current situation, how should she explain herself?

"I dreamt all of this." Ning Ning brought out the excuse she used to deal with Xu Rong, acting mysterious. "I'll tell you a secret, I can dream of what will happen in the future..."

To prove that she was telling the truth, she started to list out examples, prophesying the people who would show up for Lian's family funeral, prophesying the farce that would happen during said funeral. From the beginning to the end, Wen Yu's face showed no signs of shock, doubt or impatience, he only looked at her quietly.

Ning Ning slowly began to be unable to continue, she asked carefully, "...Do you not believe me?"

"Ning Ning," Wen Yu said gently, "I have used prophecies as an excuse in the past as well."

Ning Ning was stunned.

"I was still a child wrapped up in a criminal case, I witnessed a murder with my own eyes." Wen Yu touched her head, "I had drawn a drawing of the murderer but didn't tell anyone. I was afraid that he would seek revenge, and also...I was but a child, I was afraid that no adults would believe me."

His expression was upright, bright, firm, like a sword that was finally sharpened and polished. It was not frightening, because it was a sword of brilliance that was born from the need of protecting people.

"I would not believe a person just because they are older, I also would not belittle you just because you are a child." Wen Yu looked seriously into Ning Ning's eyes. "Don't be afraid. Look into my eyes, tell me, what did you find out?"

Ning Ning looked at him with hesitation, she was about to speak but stopped herself.

Those secrets hidden in the depths of her heart, should she...could she tell him?

Three days later, at the hospital.

Xu Rong had just survived a critical period, she laid on the bed with a pale face. She was so weak that she could not even move a single finger, but once she saw her daughter walk in, she tried her best to keep her eyes open. She looked at the doctor beside her. "I want to speak to my daughter alone."

Once the doctor had left, Xiao Yu walked over with red eyes. "Mommy, why did you try to commit suicide?"

"If I didn't do that, Ning Yu Ren would hate me." Xu Rong smiled weakly. "She would also hate you."

"But you have already looked for her for so long..." Xiao Yu said with tears in her eyes. "Once you get Ning Ning back, Auntie Ning would not be angry at you anymore."

Could she really be found? Thinking of the heavy snow on that day, thinking of the little figure she had left behind at the abandoned tracks, Xu Rong wanted to say something but could not. In the end, she just gritted her teeth and decided to hide this incident in her heart forever and to bring it to her grave!

"Xiao Yu, listen to me." She suddenly grabbed Xiao Yu's hand, her eyes were burning. "From today onwards, you have to follow Ning Yu Ren around everyday. You have to hang on to her, do not talk back

even if she scolds you. If she were to feel hungry or thirsty you have to bring her food and water, especially when she is sad, you have to be by her side..."

"Mummy..." Xiao Yu looked at her, feeling a little lost.

"The human heart is made of flesh." Xu Rong exhorted sincerely and earnestly, then she slowly looked behind Xiao Yu. "Alright, you should go out, let me have a few words with your Auntie Ning."

Xiao Yu turned back and saw that the door was open, Ning Yu Ren standing at the doorway.

When the door was closed again, only the two mothers remained.

"What did you guarantee me previously?" Ning Yu Ren spoke first, smiling as she asked, "The last time?"

"Yu Ren, I've let you down." Xu Rong struggled on the bed but failed to get up, she said tearfully, "I cannot explain myself. I feel too ashamed to look at you. If Ning Ning could not be found, I would pay for her with my life, I would die with her."

Maybe she should have left the small county earlier and entered the show business. She cried in such a frail and weak manner, with so much pain and regret. It was flawless, as if they were her true emotions.

Ning Yu Ren fell silent for a moment before she asked, "If you were to die, what happens to Xiao Yu?"

Xu Rong wiped the tears on her face. "I will give her to you as compensation."

Ning Yu Ren let out a cold laugh. "You've lost my daughter, now you want me to raise yours?"

"I'm not shameless enough to say that." Xu Rong slapped herself, then looked at Ning Yu Ren with tear-filled eyes. "You would only focus on acting and not take care of yourself, you would not let strangers take care of you either, Xiao Yu...Xiao Yu is someone whom you are familiar with, she is very capable. She has been washing clothes and has also been cooking with me since she was young. You...you can have her replace me...*cough, cough, cough*..."

She coughed a few times, then suddenly reached out with a trembling hand, holding Ning Yu Ren's fingertip.

"Also," Xu Rong gazed at her. "the Yu in her name was taken from yours. I have always hoped that she would be like you...and not

someone as useless as me..."

Ning Yu Ren looked down at her for a moment, then grabbed her fingertip and sat by the bed.

"Xu Rong," Ning Yu Ren said slowly, "I had a dream."

Xu Rong was taken aback, she did not understand why this topic was brought up.

"I dreamt that I was touched by your words and had kept Xiao Yu by my side." Ning Yu Ren muttered, "At first I hated her, I didn't even want to talk to her, but a human heart is made of flesh. A year then two years, three years then four years, after seven or eight years went by, I had already doted on her like she was my own daughter."

When she got there, she slowly lowered her head, a pair of shadowy black eyes were staring at Xu Rong. She said with a smile, "Until one day, when I was packing her old clothes, I found a yellow hat, a red coat..."

Xu Rong's expression froze.

Her first thought was: That's impossible.

A moment of hesitation had caused her not to throw the hat and the red wool coat along the way. A moment of greed had caused her to stuff those two branded items into her bag and mailed them to her hometown. Since it would quickly be given out to friends and relatives after it arrived at her hometown, they might even wear them for a few days before turning it as a gift of goodwill and giving it to someone else.

Ning Yu Ren would never find out.

The box had already been sent away! The coat and hat had already been sent away!

"I asked her where it came from." Ning Yu Ren said with a smile, "Xiao Yu told me that seven or eight years ago, she had returned home once she finished shooting <<Dreams of the Future>>. She saw that you were out and that you had packed up a box in your room. She opened the box to take a look, within were the things that you wanted to mail to your hometown. She had then taken out a few items that she liked, then packed the box up again for you. Xu Rong, do you know what I was thinking of at that time?"

She held Xu Rong's hand tightly, her fingers were so icy, so cold, like a person who had died for a very long time but could not take that last breath, thus forcibly pushed the coffin open and crawled out

from it.

"Seven to eight years ago on that winter day, Ning Ning went out with that coat and that hat. But when she was found, she was not wearing those." Ning Yu Ren continued to look down at Xu Rong with shadowy eyes, even her breath had a sense of chill, a sense of a lonesome death. "A tiny little girl, wearing only a woolen sweater, curled up by the tracks, only to be found after the snow had melted. Ning Ning, my daughter...she was frozen to death."

Chapter 104

104: Guess

"Yu Ren, what are you saying...? How is it possible for me to do such a thing to Ning Ning?" Xu Rong's forehead started to perspire, she tried very hard to force a smile at Ning Yu Ren. "You must be dazed from sleep, that was only a dream..."

"Was that only a dream?" Ning Yu Ren murmured. She opened her handbag and took out a transparent ziplock bag, within the bag were a few pills.

"Do you remember these?" Ning Yu Ren said, "I had someone bring the pills you fed her for a lab test, more than half of them were sleeping pills."

Xu Rong's forehead was perspiring even more. She wanted to deny it, but Ning Yu Ren said, "Fifth of August, Changnan Pharmacy, Li Qing—the time you bought the pills, the pharmacy, the person who sold you the pills, I have found all of that out."

Xu Rong's hands and feet felt cold. She was in a hurry that day, she did not look at the nametag on the chest of the staff member. She didn't remember the name of the staff member, but she remembered the time and place she bought the pills—the fifth of August, Changnan Pharmacy.

"That's...something I bought for myself." Xu Rong explained with difficulty, "I was having difficulties sleeping those few days and was feeling dizzy everyday, maybe that was why...I then, then accidentally gave Ning Ning the wrong pills."

"After giving her the wrong pills once, you could still give her the wrong pills twice, thrice more?" Ning Yu Ren said with a smile.

Xu Rong fell silent for a moment, her whole body was trembling all of a sudden, like she was suddenly stripped naked and thrown into the snow.

She knew everything? No. Xu Rong thought, "She's tricking me, I definitely cannot admit to it. If I were to admit to it, if I were to be brought away by the police, what would happen to Xiao Yu?"

"It wasn't me." She covered her mouth and cried under the immense pressure. "I have never harmed Ning Ning. I only gave her the wrong

pills once, out of curiosity, she took them herself later. The clothes...clothes were from when we were on our way home after a snowball fight. She started sweating, so she took them off and had me hold them. I admit, I did not take good care of her, that's why she got lost, but Yu Ren...you cannot assume that I did everything just because you are sad, I'm not that bad of a person am I?"

Would Ning Yu Ren fall for the chicanery? She let out a cackle before reaching out to caress Xu Rong's cheek. Through the window, one would mistake them as a person who was blaming herself and getting consoled by the other party.

But what came out from Ning Yu Ren's mouth was not words of consolation.

"I will not let you die nor will I hand you over to the police." Ning Yu Ren smiled at her, a smile that was extremely eerie. "You have to quickly recover and accept the gift I have prepared for you."

The smile made Xu Rong shiver nonstop, she asked while shivering, "What gift? What are you planning? Don't leave, Yu Ren, don't leave! Explain yourself!"

But Ning Yu Ren ignored her. She put on her bowler hat and smiled elegantly at Xu Rong with a side of her face, then picked her handbag up and left the room.

Xu Rong's shouts brought Xiao Yu into the room.

"Mummy." Xiao Yu walked over and looked at her worryingly, "What's wrong?"

Xu Rong huffed and puffed. The white hospital ward seemed like a white snowy ground, she was like Ning Ning—abandoned at the snowy grounds, unable to do anything, unable to escape, her fate was in the hands of Ning Yu Ren.

"It's fine, I'm fine." Xu Rong had a terrible expression on her face, but she then smiled to avoid having her daughter worry about her, "There's still hope, there's still hope for you..."

As long as Ning Ning did not return, as long as no one could prove that she had deliberately left Ning Ning behind at the abandoned tracks, then there was still hope.

At the same time, in the milk tea shop.

"Who exactly are you two?" Mu Gua stared at the two people in front of him. He looked like he did not sleep last night, looking haggard, his eyes were a little bloodshot.

Ning Ning and Wen Yu looked at each other. Ning Ning asked him, "Did it all come true?"

"That's right, it all came true." Mu Gua mocked himself, "Pei Xuan brought my sister out, the two were dressed as if for a funeral. Later that night, my sister brought home overtime pay and had a huge fight with me..."

The fight between the siblings seemed to have mentally and physically exhausted him. He looked down in silence for a moment, before slowly looking up at Ning Ning. The caution between his brows dispersed a little as it was replaced with a trace of melancholy and weakness.

"You got everything right." He asked, "Who exactly are you?"

Ning Ning could feel it. Not only was Mu Gua looking at her, Wen Yu was also looking at her.

"...Who I am is not important," Ning Ning told Mu Gua, "what's important is, three days later..."

Another 'three days later'.

Mu Gua could not help but sit up straight, Wen Yu also paid more attention to her. One of them was paying close attention to her words, the other was paying close attention to Ning Ning herself instead.

"Three days later, Pei Xuan will bring your sister to the Lian family again. Not only will he bring your sister along, the gardener, the cook and the driver would all be brought along as well." Ning Ning said, "Only you and two other people would be left at home."

"Two other people?" Mu Gua raised his eyebrows, "You counted an extra person. If the gardener, cook and driver were to all leave, the house would only have me and the maid left."

"No," Ning Ning said, "there is another person in the attic."

"Who?" Mu Gua asked.

"The other victim, the person who knows everything." Ning Ning said, "Three days later, she will knock the maid out and escape. Help her out, we will meet you outside."

Three days went by very quickly. Wen Yu had borrowed a car from a friend of Director Shi, he had also prepared food, a blanket, and a first aid kit; they were well-equipped enough to begin the great escape immediately after they got the person onboard the car. Wen Yu peeled open a piece of chocolate and gave it to Ning Ning. "Are you still not

willing to talk to me?"

Ning Ning took a bite out of the chocolate, seeming like she was stopping herself from talking.

She could swindle Mu Gua by saying she could foresee the future, but she could not swindle Wen Yu. Did he not believe in those things, or was her acting not good enough?

"I'm guessing that your real profession is an actor." Wen Yu suddenly said.

Ning Ning stopped chewing and turned around to look at him.

"Your act as a four-year-old child is very natural. Either you are very familiar with her, or you are a professional actor." Wen Yu continued.

"What are you saying?" Ning Ning blinked.

"I'm just raising a possibility, you can retort if you don't agree." Wen Yu leaned forward on the steering wheel and looked at her from the corner of his eyes. "For example, I think your real age should be around twenty-two to twenty-four years old."

"Do I seem that old?" Ning Ning questioned him back.

"You used a very skillful method to convince Mu Gua." Wen Yu said with a smile, "First, you tossed his worries away. Then, you dispelled his doubt step by step. Finally, you said what you want. A child would never do things in such a roundabout way—whatever they want, they will ask for it in a straightforward manner—only adults would talk in circles."

"This is reality, it's not a fantasy movie." Ning Ning also smiled, pinching her own face. "Look, this is human skin, this is neither a disguise or magic, reality cannot turn an adult into a child."

"That might be so on the surface." Wen Yu slowly reached his hand out to her, his slender fingers gently touched her cheek. "But on the inside...might it be another person?"

When this moment arrived, Ning Ning had originally thought that she would be at a loss on what to do, that she would be flustered, but she wasn't. She felt very calm, even a little gratified. Why? Was it because the person asking was Wen Yu?

"If there was another person here." She pointed at herself, her eyes sparkled as she asked him, "Then what do you think, who am I?"

This was a hint.

It might not be of use now, but it would be of use for him in the future.

Wen Yu furrowed his brows. Just as he was about to probe her further, someone knocked on the window behind him loudly. He turned around and saw that Mu Gua was bent over outside of the window, on his back was a teenage girl. He knocked on the window and said as he panted, "Open the door."

The car door opened, he helped the teenage girl into the backseat.

"What happened to her?" Ning Ning looked back at the teenage girl, her brows furrowed.

To nobody's surprise, the person that he helped into the car was Yu Sheng.

She was injured, her head was bleeding continuously, it had dyed the white sleeping gown on her red. She repeatedly grunted in pain. This was slightly different from Ning Ning's memory, she definitely should have knocked the maid out and escaped without a scratch.

"Her legs are impaired. She wanted to mount a surprise attack on the maid even though she sat in a wheelchair. If it wasn't for the fact that I had heard some noises and thus had gone up to help her, she might have already been beaten to death by the maid." Mu Gua said.

This was when Ning Ning noticed that there was a rod on Yu Sheng's right leg. Was it caused by the traffic accident last time? A traffic accident that was slightly brought forward by a few days, causing an unexpected injury. In the end, she almost ended up dead. In hindsight, those small and seemingly inconspicuous changes causing such a big change made a person break out in cold sweat.

"Alright, you guys quickly send her to the hospital." Mu Gua closed the door.

"Wait." Ning Ning frantically wound down the window. "Where are you going?"

"I have other things to attend to." Mu Gua was in a hurry to leave, his shoe had only left a few footprints in the snow when Ning Ning's voice rang out behind him, "Are you going to call Pei Xuan?"

Mu Gua could not help but stop in his tracks and look back at the little girl.

"You knew that too." He looked at Ning Ning with an odd expression. At this time, he was already unable to look at her as an ordinary, normal little girl.

"I know." Ning Ning opened the door and got off the car, the wind rustled by her ears. She looked at the teenager standing amidst the snowy winds in front of her and said, "I know you want to call Pei Xuan, to lure him and his lackeys to come find you, so that they would not have the time to harm your sister."

Mu Gua looked at her silently for a long time, then suddenly asked, "Then, will I succeed?"

Ning Ning fell silent for a long time, before she said softly, "You will."

Upon hearing that, Mu Gua smiled.

Snowy winds brushed past his face, his smile was more beautiful and fleeting than the snow, snow that would melt when the sun came out, a person who would disappear when the sun came out.

"That's good." He said with a smile, "As long as I can save my sister, I am satisfied."

"No," Ning Ning said coldly, "she would not be saved."

The smile on Mu Gua's face stiffened.

"After you die, your sister will be forced to become another person." Ning Ning said as she walked towards him, "She would not be able to marry the video-tape store boss, she would not be able to have kids, even more so she would not be able to forget about you. Even when she was well into her years, her only wish was...that she would rather not have been saved by you today."

Her footsteps stopped in front of him, Ning Ning held Mu Gua's hand, her tiny fingers held firmly onto his fingertip as she looked at him seriously. "So you have to come with me, we will use another method to save your sister, and you."

Mu Gua looked at her with a complicated expression, in the end he slowly opened his mouth, "What do you have in mind?"

"Get in the car first." Ning Ning looked back at the injured member on the car's backseat. "First, we send her to the hospital, we will talk about other details along the way."

When the two of them got back into the car, Wen Yu was at the backseat, beside him was the first aid kit, he was bandaging Yu Sheng up. Hearing the two of them approach, he said with his back towards them, "The situation doesn't look good."

The two of them were both shocked.

"With her like this, we have to go to the hospital." Wen Yu turned around and looked at them. "Will Pei Xuan give the house a call? If so, if the maid answered the phone in time, then all they had to do is to stop us at the hospital."

"...Then you guys send her to the hospital." Mu Gua immediately wanted to back out. "I will handle my own affairs."

How could Ning Ning let him leave her sight? She grabbed a handful of his clothes and said, "What are you afraid of? I have an idea."

Dealing with this ridiculous little brat gave Mu Gua a little ridiculous trust, thus he asked, "What idea do you have in mind?"

"Wait here." Ning Ning took a deep breath and ran towards Pei Xuan's house. Wen Yu was also done with handling Yu Sheng's injury at this time. Seeing her stumble and fall in the snow, he walked over impatiently and helped her up. He told her a few words then went into the Pei house with her in his arms. Around five minutes later, the two of them came out with a pile of things in their arms.

Those things were laid out on the backseat of the car. It was a set of makeup and a set of female clothes.

"Drive steadily." Ning Ning opened the makeup box. She was clearly just a little brat, but she was extremely experienced with the powder brush in her hand.

"Ok." The car moved off, Wen Yu's driving skill wasn't bad, he was driving steadily.

"...What are you doing?" Mu Gua had a face of terror as he watched the powder brush that was getting closer to his face.

"Makeup, also known as one of the four biggest sorceries. As long as the technique of applying makeup is incisive enough, even your mother would not be able to recognise you." Ning Ning said with a smile, "Come, for the sake of not letting Pei Xuan's lackey find you, put on some makeup."

It was finally time for her to bring out the makeup skills she had practiced hard for a long time under Crossdresser Li, no, Teacher Li.

Chapter 105

105: Revenge

Teacher Li was the person who had taught her makeup tricks and how to coordinate clothes the last time she had transmigrated as Mu Er.

Through interacting with him, Ning Ning discovered what his true profession was—not a makeup artist, but a special effects makeup artist. Compared to turning a sixty-point woman into one who was eighty points, he was more passionate about turning a young man into an old man, turning a man into a woman, turning a human into a *jiangshi*...

During her free time, Ning Ning learned one of the special effects makeup from him.

As Heaven willed it, the makeup that she learned purely out of curiosity was actually of use this day.

The car stopped in front of the hospital entrance.

Maybe because it was snowing and there were more people that had the flu, there was a huge amount of people who were in the hospital that day. Patients and their families went in and out of the hospital continuously, but there were two people who did not look like patients or the family of a patient standing guard at the entrance, staring at everyone who went in.

"Don't move, don't move." Ning Ning twisted the lipstick in her hand. "This is the last part."

The door to the car opened. Wen Yu got off first, he then carried Yu Sheng into the hospital.

Mu Gua was about to follow them before he was pulled back by his clothes from behind. Ning Ning shouted in exasperation from behind him, "Are you stupid? What if you get found out? Sit back in quickly !"

On the other hand, Wen Yu was already two to three steps up the stairs and was about to enter the hospital. One of the two people was quickly closing in, they saw that the person he was carrying had a waxy-yellow face, above the mouth was a huge mole, on the mole was a strand of hair, no matter how you looked at it, it was a skinny old man with a wretched appearance that was hit on the head for getting

caught peeping into a woman's bathroom.

It was too ugly to take a second look at, Pei Xuan's lackey immediately looked away and shifted their vision to the others who were going into the hospital.

In the car, Mu Gua and Ning Ning looked at each other.

The car window reflected Mu Gua's current looks—fair skinned with bright red lips, as if he was a coquettish minx. Mu Gua suddenly reached out and pinched Ning Ning's face and said in rage, "Since you didn't need me to get off the car, why did you have to turn me into this?"

"Let go, let go!" Ning Ning said inarticulately.

She had only learnt one special effect makeup from Teacher Li—old-age makeup. This makeup worked wonders when it was used on Yu Sheng as she was successfully sneaked into the hospital, as for Mu Gua, Ning Ning had originally planned to copy the trope of a television show and casually put on makeup for him so that he could mix in with the crowd as a girl.

As it turned out, she was too naive.

It might have been better if he didn't have any makeup on. Once he had makeup on, this guy actually looked eighty percent like his sister, how would he be able to sneak in? There was a chance that he would be recognised when someone looked at him from far away!

To quell Mu Gua's anger, Ning Ning took out Wen Yu's mobile phone along with a note Yu Sheng had left behind. "They said that they have their responsibilities, and we have our responsibilities. Listen to me..."

Around ten minutes later, in a club.

It wasn't night time yet, the second son of the Lian family was already drunk. He had his arms around a woman as he cursed, "Old fart, I knew he was biased. Damned Pei Xuan, ganging up with my daughter against me. Bitch, if I knew this would happen, I would have shot you to the wall..."

The mobile phone on his waist suddenly rang. He picked it up and held it up to his ear. "Hello?"

"Second young master." A teenager's voice rang out, "The current Miss Lian Lian at the Lian Estate is a fake."

The second son of the Lian family immediately sobered up. He

asked, "Who are you?"

"Who I am is not important," the other party said, "what is important is that I know where the real Miss Lian Lian is right now."

"Where?" The second son frantically asked, then said with a doubtful tone, "How do I know that you are not lying to me?"

"I can tell you her location right now." The other party told him the name of a hospital. "Whether it's true or not, you will know when you check it out."

"Alright, I'll go have a look." After he hung up, he did not get up from the sofa. What a joke. A rich second generation like him, getting flustered over a call from a stranger, how would that be proper? He called one of his lackeys and ordered, "Little Li, I remember that your wife is the nurse of Affiliate Hospital, right? Get her to ask around for me, did a patient named Lian Lian come in for general surgery today? Ok. Ok, I will wait for your call."

Once he hung up, he continued to fool around with the girl in his arms, doing so while cursing up a storm—he cursed the old man, he cursed Pei Xuan, he cursed his own daughter...

As he cursed and cursed, his phone rang again.

He answered the phone impatiently, "Hello, Little Li... What? There was really a patient named Lian Lian? What? You went over and took a look and it's my daughter?"

The second son was flustered. He pushed the woman in his arms from the sofa, then jumped off the sofa himself, he even jumped on the woman's leg by accident. Along with a crack, the woman screamed like a pig being slaughtered. The security rushed in from the outside. After a moment of chaos, the second son gave the woman a huge sum of medical fees before he could get away. Once he left the club, he got in his car and urged his chauffeur, "Quickly, quickly, quickly, Affiliate Hospital!"

"What's your next step?" It was still the voice of that teenager, "Bring her back and expose the impostor in front of the family?"

The second son could not help but stop in his tracks. He scanned his surroundings, his vision on everyone who was on their phones now—the big boss with a big belly, the old man with a troubled look on his face, the young girl...one was walking slowly on the snowy ground, one was sitting in a warm car, but none of them was a teenage boy.

"Of course I'm bringing her home so that the impostor at home can have her just desserts." The second son asked as he continued to look for any signs of the other party, "Where are you? Can we talk face to face?"

The other party fell silent for a moment before asking, "Don't you want Pei Xuan to have his just desserts?"

The second son was shocked, he laughed. "You seem to know a lot. Of course, compared to that little pawn, I want to get back at Pei Xuan that bastard even more!"

After all he was not very familiar with his worthless daughter, but he was old friends with Pei Xuan. Getting stabbed in the back by his old friend was more painful than getting stabbed ten times by his worthless daughter.

"But in reality you cannot get back at him," the teenager said, "you know it in your heart, compared to you, Old Master Lian believes in him more, he believes in the words of an outsider more."

The corner of the second son's eyes twitched, he wanted to retort but he was unable to. Actually, it was not only Old Master Lian, every member of the Lian family believed in outsiders more than their own family.

"Do you want a suggestion from me?" The teenager suddenly asked.

"...Speak." The second son said.

"I heard that Old Master Lian is currently having his few favourite successors over for a meal. A meal wouldn't take very long, at most two hours. They, along with the impostor, are about to come out of the house." The teenager said, "Pei Xuan swapped your daughter for an impostor without anyone knowing, why don't you take this chance to swap them back without anyone noticing?"

The second son's eyes lit up.

"I don't have to tell you the advantages of swapping them back, right?" The teenager laughed. "You have to know, the person whom Old Master Lian likes the most at the moment is her, you can have her help you by putting in many good words for you in front of Old Master Lian."

"I don't need her to put in a good word for me in front of the old man." The second son started laughing. "I only need her to put Pei Xuan down in front of the old man."

After watching the second son walk into the hospital, Mu Gua put

the mobile phone down. He turned his head and asked Ning Ning, "Why did we get him here? Couldn't we have gone over to take my sister and run?"

"We aren't the ones who had done something wrong, why should we run?" Ning Ning answered. She looked at the snow that was falling outside the window. The snow was so white, like the jade mask that was on his face. She muttered, "Pei Xuan is everyone's sworn enemy. This is everyone's revenge, everyone gets to stab him, no one gets left behind."

In the hospital, the second son walked past room by room. The rooms were noisy, but they did not attract his attention. He was currently busy with his own revenge, but within a hospital room another person's revenge was being enacted.

"Why are you here?" Xu Rong looked at the man in front of her with fear.

It was a tall man full of hostilities. He roared at the nurse beside him, "This is my wife, I'm visiting my wife, what has it got to do with you?"

Then he turned around and smiled at Xu Rong. "Naturally it's because your boss informed me that you had fallen sick and needed to be cared for, so here I am."

Xu Rong's face turned pale, her forehead started perspiring.

This man had come looking for her in the past, not for anything else but her hard-earned money. However, he could not enter the residential area Ning Yu Ren lived in. Even if he could, Ning Yu Ren would not have opened the door for him. Even if he were to cause too much of a disturbance, Ning Yu Ren would have called the police outright.

This man was the typical kind of person who would beat up his wife and cower in front of the police.

"You're lying." Xu Rong felt her mouth dry up, she said hoarsely, "How could Yu Ren have told you to come take care of me? It's not like she doesn't know that you, you..."

Xu Rong stopped speaking abruptly, the words Ning Yu Ren had said flashed across her mind.

"I will not let you die nor will I hand you over to the police. You have to quickly recover and accept the gift I have prepared for you."

Xu Rong would not stop sweating, her face was turning more and

more pale, her body could not help but start to shiver. The man on the other hand had already gotten close to her and cracked a disgusting smile. "I see that you have pretty much recovered, you should quickly get discharged, don't waste money here. I asked about it, one day stay here costs a lot."

"...I don't have money." Xu Rong stuttered, "It's Yu Ren, Yu Ren will be giving me an advance payment."

The man pursed his lips. "Then quickly give her a call, tell her not to pay the hospital, she could just directly give me the money!"

Xu Rong was almost crying. Once the money landed into his hands, it would immediately turn into cigarettes and alcohol, he wouldn't even buy a single cup of rice—in what world would he use them to pay for her medical bills?

At this time, an old woman with a mean face came in with a crying little girl in her arms, she shouted at the man, "The discharge procedures are done, why are you two still dragging your feet?"

"Mummy!" The little girl in her arms cried at Xu Rong, "I don't want to go back, I don't want to go back to the countryside!"

"Xiao Yu!" Xu Rong fell off the bed and staggered to her daughter. She snatched her back into her arms, tears finally flowed. "Mom, I had finally enrolled Xiao Yu into provincial kindergarten after much difficulty, why are you sending her back to the countryside?"

"I asked about it, that kindergarten is too expensive, it's more expensive than the primary school in our hometown." The old woman *hmph*-ed, "We aren't rich people, why should she attend such a good kindergarten? Moreover, she is a girl. Girls don't have to attend school, it's enough for her to be able to write her name..."

"Mom!" Xu Rong screamed, "Xiao Yu is not like us! Xiao Yu is already on television! She will become a huge star, a huge star like Ning Yu Ren."

The old woman was stunned by her scream. Once she got back to her senses she gave Xu Rong a forceful slap just like she used to do back at home, she scolded her, "Crazy talk. You think everyone is a Ning Yu Ren? Huge star. If she is a huge star, why don't I see her giving me money?"

The mother and daughter pair wept and sobbed as they were dragged out of the hospital by the man and the old woman.

How would the future turn out for the two of them?

Perhaps, it would return to how it should originally have been.

At night, Ning Yu Ren returned to the empty house. Once she entered the door, she heard the phone ring. She was unsure on how long the phone had been ringing for, but it continuously rang as if it was brooding.

She slowly took off her high heels and walked to the phone, picking it up, "Hello?"

"Yu Ren!" Xu Rong was crying on the other end, she sounded like she was having a breakdown. "Yu Ren, I was wrong! What do you need me to do? What do you need me to do before you are willing to let me...no, let Xiao Yu off?"

"What are you talking about?" Ning Yu Ren asked gently, "What do you mean by letting you off?"

"I don't care what happens to me, if you want me to die I will immediately jump off from a building, but Xiao Yu..." Xu Rong choked, "Xiao Yu has so much potential. She is such a smart child, she also loves to act, doesn't she remind you of yourself when you were young? I'm begging you, keep her by your side. For the sake of our years of friendship, for my sake as a mother..."

"Xu Rong," Ning Yu Ren interrupted her, she said blandly, "you are a mother, I am also a mother."

Xu Rong did not make a sound for a very long time.

"So you should accept my gift with a peace of mind." Ning Yu Ren said gently, "This is the future you are supposed to have."

After she finished speaking, she hung up and would ignore the phone no matter how much it rang afterwards.

"It's time for me to fetch Ning Ning," she told herself, "but before that, there is something I have to do."

She returned to her room and opened her safe. Within was neither money nor jewelry, it was stacks of video tapes instead, each of them were also labelled with a time and date. These were her diaries. Every time she visited Life Theater, she would record the story of her transmigration—in the style of a movie.

She took out a blank video tape and started to record the diary of the day.

The camera was pointed at her, she smiled at the camera.

"Hello, Ning Yu Ren," she said, "I came from the year 2007, I am

you ten years in the future."

Chapter 106

106: Dreams of the Future

"Ten years later, you would have everything. You would have achieved success and won recognition, money was just a string of numbers to you, you would have a lot of suitors and a lot of people view you as a legend. The one thing you lost...was Ning Ning." Ning Yu Ren said, "You would be unable to accept this fact, you would want to change her fate, so you would spend all your savings and buy all the tickets Pei Xuan has."

Ning Yu Ren smirked at the camera, it was a smirk that was bitter to the end. "It was the beginning of your nightmare."

The first ticket was an ordinary ticket—an ordinary ticket which did not allow you to designate the transmigration's time and place. In < <Affliction> >, Ning Yu Ren had transmigrated as a nurse of a hospital. The first thing she did once she had opened her eyes was to ask someone, "What is the date today?"

"It's the twelfth of January, 1998." The person she asked answered.

Ning Yu Ren's hopes were dashed. She had only missed it by a month, she had actually missed it by only a month. She would have been able to save her daughter if she had been a month earlier.

"Why are you still standing here? Come over and help quickly, the patient in room 3 is in a precarious state." A nurse shouted at her in exasperation.

Ning Yu Ren assented. Her years of transmigration experience had caused her body to instinctively act as the character she transmigrated as, no matter how painful it was. She did not even have the time to wipe her tears before she ran along with the other party to room 3.

Within the room was a familiar face.

Xu Rong.

She looked like she was hanging by a thread, lingering on her last breath, fighting to reach out to Xiao Yu.

Seeing her like this, Ning Yu Ren could not help but feel a trace of pity and guilt in her heart. Ning Yu Ren had once hated Xu Rong a lot because she was the one who had lost Ning Ning. Even after she had

taken pesticide for the sake of atoning for her sin, Ning Yu Ren had only visited her once. Afterwards, she just left Xu Rong be and never visited again.

It was only when a crying Xiao Yu had stood at her door holding Xu Rong's urn that she learnt that Xu Rong was dead. Her heart had felt empty for a moment. The sounds of the rain slowly got louder, she opened the door and let Xiao Yu in.

The current Xu Rong was not dead yet. Just as Ning Yu Ren was thinking about saving her, Xu Rong held Xiao Yu's hand while panting. "Once I die, don't let your father know. Get someone to cremate me immediately, then hold my urn, *cough, cough*, go to Ning Yu Ren's house."

Ning Yu Ren was stunned for a moment.

"Mum..." Xiao Yu started crying.

"No crying." Maybe it was because she was running out of time, Xu Rong looked a little ferocious, she was not as kind and gentle as she usually was. She gritted her teeth. "If you want to cry, save it for when you are at the door of Ning Yu Ren's house. Don't...don't let what I've done for you go to waste."

What did she do?

Ning Yu Ren looked at what was happening in front of her in a blank. Later on, she tailed Xiao Yu and watched her bring the urn to her own house. She watched as Xiao Yu wailed and cried in front of her door, she watched as she herself opened the door and let Xiao Yu in with a complicated expression on her face.

She once thought that everything had happened out of her own kindness, but in the end, what if her kindness was within someone else's calculation?

Not long after <<Affliction>> ended, Ning Yu Ren immediately used a second movie ticket. It was an ordinary ticket like the one before. She then transmigrated into <<Confidante>> as Xiao Yu's junior high school classmate.

The two of them quickly became bosom buddies. The things that were never said to Ning Yu Ren, Xiao Yu easily told her bosom buddy.

"Ning Yu Ren had been treating me as a substitute." Xiao Yu said with a smile. "But it's fine, I'm also treating her as a substitute."

Ning Yu Ren was smiling on the surface, but her heart broke.

During this time, she had already taken Xiao Yu in for almost six years. Six years of companionship, she had long treated Xiao Yu as her second child. Although Xu Rong had told her to order Xiao Yu around like a servant, she had never done that. On the contrary, Ning Yu Ren had specially hired someone to take care of Xiao Yu.

"Speaking of, what was your biological mother like?" Ning Yu Ren asked with a curious look while holding back the sadness in her heart.

"My mummy treated me very well. Let me tell you a secret." Xiao Yu looked at her surroundings then got up to Ning Yu Ren's ear, using her hand to cover her mouth as she told her the secret.

Ning Yu Ren's eyes slowly widened.

Xiao Yu quietly said into her ear, "My mom was willing to do anything for me. She fought for my first acting opportunity by drugging someone."

Her first acting opportunity? Drugging? Whom did she drug?

After < <Confidante> > ended, Ning Yu Ren used a third ticket, a fourth ticket, a fifth ticket... She was having less and less tickets, but she had discovered more and more. She came to know so much that it had broken everything she thought she knew. She came to know so much that she had laughed and cried in her room in the middle of the night.

No one knew that Movie Empress Ning Yu Ren was already on the verge of collapse. She would not even eat a thing, her fridge was filled with nothing but pills and herbal tea.

In the end, on a winter day ten years later, on the anniversary of Ning Ning's death, she stood at the entrance of Life Theater. Her scrawny hand held onto her last movie ticket. She looked at the poster in front of her and slowly cracked a smile. "It's finally here."

She walked over and handed her ticket to the doorman.

Her last ticket, an odd-numbered designated ticket.

The doorman looked at the ticket and asked, "The character you are designating is?"

Was there any other choice? Ning Yu Ren smiled. "Myself."

She closed her eyes on the audience seats, then opened her eyes while in her body from ten years ago.

The day had yet to break, she gently pushed the door open and walked into her daughter's room. She bent down and kissed the

forehead of her daughter who was sound asleep. Ning Ning opened her eyes. She immediately smiled like an angel upon seeing that it was her, she reached out and hugged her neck. "Mama, let's sleep together."

Ning Yu Ren's eyes immediately glistened with tears.

"Ning Ning," she rubbed Ning Ning's nose with her own and gently asked, "tell me, what kind of Mama do you want?"

"A Mama like you." Ning Ning answered.

"Sweet-talking little brat." Ning Yu Ren started giggling. "I'm talking about the future...what do you want me to be like ten years in the future?"

This question seemed to be too difficult for a four-year-old Ning Ning. She tilted her head and thought about it, still smiling. "Like you."

Ning Yu Ren closed her eyes and hugged her tightly.

When she opened her eyes once again, she was sitting in front of the camera. She looked at the camera in front of her and said, "Ning Yu Ren, don't turn into me."

She said that as she hugged the things in her arms tightly. Ning Ning's clothes, Ning Ning's doll, Ning Ning's blanket, everything that had her scent.

"I'm naive and stupid, I was made use of and deceived. I lost the most important person in my life and raised the child of my sworn enemy." Ning Yu Ren chuckled. "How can you end up like me?"

She picked up the tiny teddy bear and gave it a kiss. She turned around and looked at the screen and smiled for the last time.

"For the sake of Ning Ning," she said while smiling, "kill me. Don't let me appear ever again. Become another type of person, have another kind of future...a future where Ning Ning is still alive."

The future had changed, but these changes would usually require a price. Sometimes the price was paid by someone else, sometimes it was paid by the person themselves.

Ning Ning watched the entrance closely. The door had opened, Lian Yuan Yuan stormed out, a group of people surrounded her. She scanned her surroundings in search of traces of Pei Xuan.

"Right now!" A group of people rushed out of a car, passing Lian Yuan Yuan by and hurrying towards the front door.

Mu Er who had been a step slower than Lian Yuan Yuan was given a big shock as she was about to walk out of the door. She took a few steps back. "You... Mu Gua, why did you have a sex change!?"

"There is no time to explain, get in the car quickly." Mu Gua took off his coat and tossed it at her. "Right, put this on quickly."

"A gift of friendship." The second son took off his hat and put it on Mu Er's head.

Mu Er was still in shock over her brother's sex change. A coat and a hat were inexplicably tossed at her, then she was shoved into an unfamiliar car.

"Wait a minute, what exactly is happening?" Mu Er finally came back to her senses. She leaned towards the window and looked out. "Who is that woman? What does she intend to do?"

Behind the front door, the second son had walked out with Yu Sheng. Yu Sheng had already switched into the same clothes as Mu Er. Due to the fact that she just had stitches done, she was wearing a hat, standing quietly by the side of the second son.

"That is the real young miss of the Lian family." Mu Gua said without holding back, "A fake like you can retire now."

Mu Er looked at him in shock for a while, then gave him a big slap. "How could you team up with an outsider to go against your sister?!"

Mu Gua had his wits slapped out of him. It was a while later that he angrily pushed her. "What's the matter? You still wanted to continue to be a fake? Would you be able to do that?"

"Why not? I am a person who will become an actress in the future."

"Heh heh."

"Heh heh your ass! I almost became the Lian family daughter. If that would have happened, I could have bought you anything and everything."

"I don't give a damn."

"Then what do you give a damn about?"

"I give a damn about you."

The siblings quietened down. After a while, Mu Er who had been ferocious a while ago looked down, covering her mouth and crying out.

"You shouldn't put up a brave front even though you were scared."

Mu Gua sighed and brought her into his arms. "Don't do this again in the future, you still have me."

Ning Ning who was on the front seat looked away from them. According to her observation, she had confirmed one thing. The Mu Er she was looking at was the real Mu Er, not the Mu Er she had transmigrated as.

When did she turn back into the real Mu Er? When did the future change? No matter what, she did it, she had changed the fate of the siblings.

At this moment, the phone rang.

Wen Yu controlled the steering wheel as he answered the call, "Hello."

"It's me." The second son's voice rang out.

"What's the situation?" Wen Yu asked, the people in the car turned silent as they waited for the latest information.

"Pei Xuan was dumbfounded." The second son laughed out loud. "He circled around Lian Lian, repeatedly asking her what happened, why would she not go with him. I answered for her: 'Because you are ugly.' Hahahaha!"

Yu Sheng was put on the phone next, she said, "I pretended to let it slip that the mastermind behind this 'affection test' this time was Pei Xuan. The other family members of the Lian family were furious. Some of them wanted to call the police, but they did not know what to charge him for, there were others who wanted to beat him up. He had run away since."

"Got it, keep in touch." Wen Yu hung up. He updated everyone about the situation then said, "I'm going to the police, I have some evidence on hand. What about you guys? Where do you want to go?"

Mu Gua and Mu Er looked at each other, then they looked at him earnestly. "Can you bring us home? Our mother is still at home."

Wen Yu did not reject them, but when the car arrived at their rented apartment building, the two of them were both startled at the same time.

Because a car was already parked in front of the apartment, it had a very familiar license plate. The two of them looked at each other before frantically getting out of the car.

They went upstairs to investigate, the door was already opened.

Two of Pei Xuan's lackeys had already been waiting inside for a long time. As they watched the siblings come in, they ferociously said, "Wait here, Pei Xuan will be here soon."

The two siblings could only wait. At the same time, they made a few hand signals behind their back. Wen Yu and Ning Ning who had originally come along then quietly retreated when they saw the hand signals.

Only the siblings entered the apartment.

Not long after, Pei Xuan arrived.

He walked in as if he was entering his own home. He smiled and greeted the both of them. "Sit."

Without waiting for the two of them to sit down, he sat down on the only chair in the apartment. He smiled at the two of them and said, "I think that we need to have a good talk."

Chapter 107

107: For Whom

"I treated both of you well." Pei Xuan crossed his hands and looked at Mu Gua. "You had quit school and entered society, working as a construction worker. I had seen that you were still young and brought you back. I gave you a job that pays you in a month what you would have earned in a year, what are you not satisfied about?"

Then he looked at Mu Er and smiled, "You said that you wanted to support your family, that as long as you could cure your mother and provide for your brother's university tuition fees, you were willing to do anything. I never made you do things that you didn't like to do. I let you act. Didn't you want to be an actress? You could do the things you liked while making money, what are you not satisfied about?"

The smile on his face slowly disappeared, his expression slowly turning cold, lowering the temperature in the room all of a sudden.

"Give me one reason," Pei Xuan said blandly, "why did you betray me?"

Mu Gua, "I want to go back to being a construction worker."

"I..." Mu Er was unable to blatantly lie like him, or it might be because she had spent a longer time with him and didn't want to be perfunctory with Pei Xuan, she pursed her lips and said, "Sorry, becoming an actress is my dream, but a dream is still a dream in the end. After trying it out, I discovered that I like the life of an ordinary person more. I'm really sorry, the money...I will think of a way to earn them and return them back to you."

"I do not lack money." Pei Xuan stood up from the chair and slowly walked towards her, pinching her chin while saying, "What I lack is you."

Mu Er was taken aback, she looked up at him.

Being at breathing distance with those captivating eyes, Mu Gua suddenly shouted from the side, "Sis!"

Mu Er was then woken up from her dream-like state. She let out an exclamation and pushed him away.

Pei Xuan took a few steps back from the push. His two lackeys

walked forward as though they wanted to teach this girl a lesson on behalf of him, but he raised his hand to stop them. He looked at Mu Er who was trembling slightly and suddenly smiled at her.

It was a smile that had a slight sense of evil and a slight sense of affection, which made Mu Er stare at him in a daze again.

"Just come along with me." He slowly reached out a hand towards Mu Er as he looked at her with certainty. "You are willing to do anything for me."

Because you love me.

Mu Er stared at the hand in front of her, struggles were written all over her face.

"I cannot." She said in a low voice, "What you are doing is bad. I don't want to get caught together with you, I'm scared..."

"We won't get caught as long as I win." Pei Xuan said with tender affection, "Darling, do you think that I will lose?"

He was very smart. He always won—using cunning, evil and ruthless means.

Mu Er's hand that was by her side was raised a little, Mu Gua looked at her with shock and pain. "Sis..."

That hand was struggling. It was raised and lowered as the smile on Pei Xuan's face grew darker and darker. He was like a demon king, the girl in front of him a witch he had been seducing. The moment she placed her hand into his, the future would turn into the one Ning Ning knew.

A criminal mastermind who hid behind the scenes, a witch who enticed all living beings on stage.

"Freeze!"

The two of them were surprised at the same time, turning their heads around.

Two policemen were standing at the doorway. One of them walked up to Pei Xuan, scanning him from head to toe for a moment then said, "Are you Pei Xuan? Someone wants to report you for breaking and entering, bigamy, and fraud. Please come with us."

Bigamy? Mu Er was shocked. Her cheeks had turned red from anger, she hurriedly took two steps back and hid behind her brother, unwilling to take another look at Pei Xuan anymore.

Pei Xuan's eyes held a trace of surprise, but they quickly reverted back to their usual calm. He adjusted his glasses in a gentle and refined manner. "Alright. Please give me a moment, let me inform my lawyer."

He gave his lawyer a call then went out with the two policemen. A few neighbours were standing by the door as they pointed at and talked about him. He did not pay them any mind, he only stopped when he had gotten downstairs, looking across the street.

He looked at the little girl hiding behind Wen Yu.

"Please come back with us to give us your testimony." The police stopped in front of Wen Yu.

"Alright." Wen Yu nodded. Just as he was about to leave with Ning Ning, he suddenly saw Pei Xuan walking towards them. His body immediately stiffened and he looked at Pei Xuan cautiously.

"Relax, I'm not here for you." Pei Xuan smiled at him, then looked down at Ning Ning. "Little lady who loves custard cream buns, your mother has been frantically looking for you. Don't loiter around outside, go home quickly."

Ning Ning was taken aback. She watched as he got into the police car, not understanding why he came over to specially tell her that. There was a possibility that flashed in her mind, but she didn't believe it—she refused to believe it—thus, she quickly tossed the possibility aside and held the hand beside her. "Big Brother Wen Yu, let's go."

Mu Gua and Mu Er came down together as well. Initially, they had wanted to help Wen Yu take care of the child, but Ning Ning rejected them. Because those siblings had things to attend to, she wanted to follow Wen Yu to the police station to take a look at what would happen to Pei Xuan.

As if he knew what she was thinking of, Wen Yu said on the way there, "I have already contacted Teacher Yan along with his other victims, they are making their way there. This time, he will not escape no matter what."

As expected, the ones who came were women. It shouldn't only be the two that were there, there should be still a few who were on their way. What was worse was that the moment they saw Pei Xuan, they flew into rage. One of them had rushed up to kick him, the other had rushed up to beat him, but the moment Pei Xuan had lowered his head and whispered a few words in their ears, they hugged him and started crying.

"Pardon me." Pei Xuan turned and smiled at the policeman who was detaining him. "Can you give them a glass of warm water?"

The corner of Ning Ning's eye twitched as she watched from the side. Would this fellow really be brought to justice? She was not the only one who was a little worried, she looked up at Wen Yu beside her and saw that he was also frowning.

"It's fine." Ning Ning held onto his finger tightly as she said in a serious tone. "Not everyone will be like that."

At least Yan Qing, Yu Sheng, and Lian family whom he had terrorised would not let him off.

Wen Yu smiled. Just as Ning Ning was about to say something, his mobile phone rang, he answered it and passed it to her in a little while.

"Ning Ning." Ning Yu Ren's voice rang out from the other side. "Where are you? I'll come get you."

"I'm at the police station." Ning Ning answered.

"Police station?" Ning Yu Ren asked doubtfully, "What are you doing over there?"

"I'm accompanying Big Brother Wen Yu while he records his testimony." Ning Ning probed by saying, "A big baddie named Pei Xuan was caught."

"Pei Xuan?" Ning Yu Ren's tone was very meek. "He was arrested?"

In that instant Ning Ning's heart could not help but thump. She beat Ning Yu Ren in speaking first, "You don't have to fetch me, I will get Big Brother Wen Yu to send me back."

She quickly hung up.

"What's wrong?" Wen Yu looked at her from the side.

"...Nothing." Ning Ning felt too ashamed to tell him the truth.

She didn't want Mama to come over, she didn't want Mama to meet Pei Xuan. Pei Xuan's attitude towards her was too strange. She was afraid that they had a relationship that surpassed that of business partners.

Wen Yu looked at her deeply for a moment without speaking.

Once he got his testimony recorded, he drove her home.

The sky was almost dark, the cars on the road came and went, Wen

Yu slowly brought the car to a stop at a traffic light. Ning Ning idled her time away in the backseat as she played around with the mobile phone.

"You can call her back." Wen Yu, who was driving, suddenly said.

Ning Ning looked up at him.

"There shouldn't be any reservations between family members. You can ask her any questions you have." Wen Yu said.

"What if..." Ning Ning said with difficulty, "what if the answer is very scary?"

It was too scary! It didn't matter if her biological father was Pei Xuan or Director Chen, they were both too scary! She would rather be adopted!

"Would you not love your mother anymore if the answer is scary?" Wen Yu asked with a smile.

Ning Ning was taken aback. She looked down and said quietly, "That's not possible."

Ning Yu Ren was the one who had given birth to her, educated her and given her everything. Ning Ning loved her the most. How could she come to hate her because of a man who had never appeared in her life?

No matter if she was born into this world from love, no matter if that love was touching to Ning Yu Ren, or if it was a black mark in her history—that was Mama's love, Mama's past. She was willing to bring them, bring Mama into her embrace.

"I want to call Mama..." Ning Ning said. Before she could finish speaking, a hand had already pulled open the front car door, then a teenage girl got into the car.

"Oh." Slightly curly hair fell from her shoulders, her hair was dotted with snow, she grinned at Wen Yu. "Looking at the license plate, I thought it was Little Li who was driving, I didn't think it was you."

This was an especially sociable girl with a sweet smile. She was already completely seated in the front seat when she spoke. She turned around and looked at Ning Ning. "Who is this? Your little niece?"

"The child of a friend," Wen Yu answered, "I'm about to send her home."

"You are such a people pleaser." The girl gently bumped him with

her shoulder. Wen Yu retracted to his side as she was being over familiar. That reaction seemed to have amused her, she started to chuckle, "Send me back home later, I've been walking for the whole day, I cannot walk anymore."

Ning Ning looked at Wen Yu then the girl.

The words of her grandmother before she had transmigrated flashed in her head.

"In 1997, at the time when you went missing, If not for a teenage couple who had picked you up, you probably would have frozen to death in the harsh winter. Speaking of which, what were their names, the name of the boy seems to be Wen...Sigh, I'm getting old, I cannot remember clearly."

Ning Ning looked at Wen Yu, then at the girl beside him with a weird expression and thought: *Don't tell me she was talking about this incident?*

"Oh? So you are Ning Yu Ren's daughter?" The girl suddenly turned back and reached out after talking to Wen Yu for a while. She took her tiny hand and shook it. "Nice to meet you. I am also an actress. I entered the business after watching your mother act in <<The Person within the Painting>>. Her acting is truly amazing, I really idolise her! Can you get your mother's autograph for me?"

She was very sociable and very good at mooching off people—no matter if it was mooching off a car ride or mooching off an opportunity to get to know the movie empress. Although there were a lot of people in show business who wanted to mooch off like that, to be able to mooch off and not have people hate you was a kind of talent.

Ning Ning did not have that kind of talent, the girl in front of her did. Honestly speaking, Ning Ning admired this type of person quite a bit, thus she nodded. "Al...right!"

The traffic light turned green, the cars that had stopped then started to move again, but one of them suddenly came to a screeching halt a few seconds later.

Ning Ning saw it very clearly.

A man who was standing on the sidewalk was ferociously pushed from behind into the stream of cars.

The car that was at the front did not manage to stop in time and hit him.

There were sounds of cars braking, people screaming, people

calling the police. The person who had pushed him remained rooted on the spot, the body stayed in the pushing stance, the face was injured, the expression was kind of dull, it even looked like they were a little at a loss—it was Xu Rong.

The shot freeze-framed on her face, the world suddenly turning grey.

The sounds of cars braking, people screaming, people calling the police disappeared one by one, the world had turned silent.

This was already not her first time seeing something like this, Ning Ning slowly closed her eyes.

When she opened her eyes again, a giant screen was suspended in front of her. She was sitting on the audience seat, an arm was around her shoulders, the person said with a laugh, "This is everyone's revenge. Everyone gets a stab at him, no one gets left behind...who are you taking revenge for?"

With a slight shock, Ning Ning turned and looked at him.

The screen lit up, it was reflected in a blurred and colourful manner on his jade mask. He looked down at her with a smile, his index finger gently prodded her lips. "Here, tell me secretly...for whom?"

Chapter 108

108: Hungry Love

For you.

It was just three words, why were they so hard to say?

"It's just three words." Shi Zhong Tang smiled coquettishly. "Are they that hard to say? Here, say them with me—Shi Zhong Tang, Shi Zhong Tang, Shi Zhong Tang, Shi Zhong Tang..."

"You are my friend." Ning Ning finally spoke, trying hard to look for a reason for her actions. "Pei Xuan had turned you into this, how could I let him off easily?"

"It's not that bad here." Shi Zhong Tang shrugged in a relaxed manner. "There are a lot of movies I can watch everyday, sometimes I would occasionally see very interesting customers. Moreover, I've told you long ago, even if I had never met you, even if I had never met Pei Xuan, I would have eventually ended up here."

Ning Ning looked at him with some grievances, "What I've done for you...are you not happy about it at all?"

She had finally admitted it.

My revenge...was for you.

"You want me to praise you? Of course I would praise you." Shi Zhong Tang reached out and brought her into his arms and whispered sweet nothings into her ear.

"...I didn't do these things for you to praise me." Ning Ning struggled to get out of his arms. She got up too violently and knocked down the chair behind her.

Like dominos, the carved chairs fell down one by one and fanned out behind her.

She was standing, he was sitting, the two of them looked at each other for a while. Shi Zhong Tang slowly placed his hand on his chest, he told her in a twittering manner, "Sorry. I have suddenly realised that I don't seem to be as open-minded as I thought I was."

Ning Ning looked at his disappointed looks, the fire that had been lit in her heart had suddenly been extinguished again. She walked

over, held his hand and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I can watch our <<The Person Within the Painting>> repeatedly for dozens or hundreds of times." He looked up at her. "But when I saw you wipe Mu Gua's body, I wish I could send you an oven immediately so you can put him in and bake him dry!"

Ning Ning was stunned.

"But that's also a good thing." He smiled, the peach colour at the corner of his eyes brightened. "Possessiveness, a proof that I really love you."

"...You are teasing me again." Ning Ning looked away, unable to look into his eyes. "Didn't you say, even if you didn't meet me, you would have eventually ended up here anyway?"

"Just like you said, I am your friend, so you took revenge for me." Shi Zhong Tang smiled. "Things like revenge take time and energy, there are no rewards. It's just getting back at the person, who would get back at someone for just a friend? In the end, both you and me, we are both just lying to ourselves."

"...I'm not." Ning Ning pursed her lips, as if to prove that she was speaking the truth, she stared at him in his eyes. "I'm not!"

"You're not lying if you say so, but I am." Shi Zhong Tang said. He pulled her hand to his lips. Long and slender fingers, a jade mask, he seemed to want to gently take a bite, but was blocked off by the mask. He could only gently, regretfully, distressfully tried his absolute best to endure while he mumbled, "So hungry..."

You are always in the light, I am always drowning in the darkness, waiting for you, waiting for your answer.

...You have finally answered me, it's just that you gave too little., I have been waiting too long in the darkness, my stomach has already been gurgling. This little bit of love, it's like a nibble of a cookie, it wasn't filling, I feel more hungry...

"So hungry?" Ning Ning said doubtfully. Did masked people need to eat? Or was it because he entered the theater because of an accident, so his digestive system was different from the others? "What do you want to eat? I'll buy it for you."

"...You cannot come back in after you leave." Shi Zhong Tang smiled. "What did you bring with you?"

As an actress, Ning Ning had to constantly watch her diet, how could she be bringing snacks with her? Ning Ning rummaged through

her bag and took out a piece of chewing gum. "Do you want this?"

Shi Zhong Tang accepted it with a smile, but did not eat it.

The moment the mask replaced his face, his mouth was unable to eat, his lips unable to kiss the girl he loved.

"The night is long, I'll slowly savour it." Shi Zhong Tang waved the chewing gum in his hand.

The night is long, I don't know when you'll be here the next time. Before you come back, I will use it as your substitute—but it will never be able to replace you, so you have to come back quickly. Come back soon, don't let me go crazy with hunger...

< <Dreams of the Future> > ended.

After she came out of the theater, Ning Ning returned home in a rush.

She first gave Lian Lian a call. "Hello? Is this Lian Lian?"

A man's voice rang out, "You have the wrong number."

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief once the person hung up. She turned on her computer and began searching for information on the Lian family. As a famous family rife with infighting, there were quite a number of novels and shows which had used them as reference material, information about their fights remained everywhere.

It was just that information on Lian Lian was few and far between.

Although she still had her good looks, she had long been married to a boss of a media company. She had escaped from the whirlpool of infighting, starting a business together with said boss. She would occasionally appear in the economic section—not the gossip section—which was why she didn't attract that most netizens' attention much.

"The future has changed." Ning Ning took a deep breath. To further confirm that this was true, she sent a message to her manager, Li Bo Yue, on WeChat.

[Has the male lead for < <Trial of the Witch> > been confirmed?]

Initially, she thought that she would only get a reply the day after, but when the message was sent, he immediately replied. It looked like Li Bo Yue had been cultivating¹ again tonight...ah no, worked overnight again tonight.

[Whose film? Where did you get that information?]

Looking at that message, Ning Ning could confirm that Mu Er's

future had really been changed. She did not become part of the Lian family, she did not become Pei Xuan's accomplice and thus the movie < <Trial for the Witch> > would not exist at all.

After breathing a sigh of relief, Ning Ning sent another message: [Is there any information on Teacher Yan Qing's film? Who has been chosen as the female lead?]

Li Bo Yue's reply gave her a shock.

[Who is Teacher Yan Qing?]

Ning Ning frantically gave him a call. "Yan Qing the singer."

"Her?" Li Bo Yue pinched the mobile phone with his ear and shoulders, his fingers were still tapping on the keyboard. "What's wrong with her?"

"Didn't she want to film a biography?" Ning Ning asked meekly, "Did you not hear about it?"

"I didn't hear anything about that." Li Bo Yue said, "What about you? Where did you hear it?"

Ning Ning fell silent.

< <Trial for the Witch> > was no more, < <Person by the Pillow> > was also no more, how could this have happened? Suddenly it all clicked. Because Pei Xuan had been arrested, Yan Qing would have returned from abroad to resolve this matter after receiving the notice from Wen Yu. Once she had gotten closure, she would not be mulling over it for over ten years, she would not necessarily have wanted to make a movie on the story of < <Person by the Pillow> >.

"...Nothing." Ning Ning laughed. "Maybe I was dreaming. I'll go back to sleep, you should go to sleep soon as well. Good..."

"Hold up. Don't say good night that quickly." Li Bo Yue switched his mobile to his other ear. "Director Chen recommended a script and asked for you to be in it."

Ning Ning was surprised. "What movie?"

Li Bo Yue skimmed the name of the document and answered with laughter. "< <Elder Brother's Lover> >."

"...This title, don't tell me..." Ning Ning said slowly.

"Yes, it's what you're thinking of." Li Bo Yue laughed. "A family drama."

The movie was about a man and a woman who had met through

matchmaking. They were a perfect match, their families were fairly well off, they were a golden couple in the eyes of outsiders. They matched abnormally well, they were also very satisfied with each other, thus they got immediately engaged after they met each other's parents. Just as they were about to get married, the woman received the news of the man dying in a plane crash.

The female lead character was in pain for a very long period of time. During this period, the person who had consoled her was the younger brother of the man.

The two of them started to develop feelings (for each other) because of that. Just as the two were about to get together, the elder brother actually came back to life...

"That's the gist of the story." Li Bo Yue said, "It's a very simple story, but it's a huge test of your acting skills, because the female lead's character specification is a little different from the pure and good woman in other scripts..."

Ning Ning probed, "A flirtatious minx?"

"That's right, she is a flirtatious minx." Li Bo Yue laughed. "In other love triangles, the female leads would feel a deep sense of guilt, but this one did not have that at all, she was actually enjoying it."

"How much was she enjoying it?" Ning Ning asked.

"I've emailed it to you, take a look for yourself." Li Bo Yue clicked the send button.

Ning Ning downloaded the script to look at it. After she skimmed over it once, she came to a conclusion: Director Chen was really good at picking movies. No matter what the other characters were like, the female lead was never normal!

Both the elder and younger brothers were normal people, they were also good people. No matter whom the female lead chose, the other would have backed out of this love triangle like a gentleman. Yet, the female lead did not do that, she was not willing to let either of them go.

She picked a wedding dress with the elder brother and sent photos of herself taking off that wedding dress in the changing room to the younger brother. She kissed the younger brother under a wisteria tree as she plucked a wisteria petal so she could make a bookmark for the elder brother.

She had the siblings dancing on the palm of her hand,

unscrupulously enjoying the forbidden love they were having.

Her mantra was a sentence—Ning Ning quietly read it out, "As long as I don't get caught, I'm not in the wrong."

"She was truly a selfish and greedy woman." Ning Ning thought. Her vision suddenly fixed itself on one of the subplots. She thought she was seeing things, thus she reread it several times, then she quickly gave Li Bo Yue a call.

"You finished reading that quickly?" Li Bo Yue asked.

"No." Ning Ning said with difficulty, "I'm halfway through, I have a question to ask you."

"What is it?" Li Bo Yue said.

"...Regarding the love scenes..." Ning Ning stammered, "Aren't there too many of those?"

It was not that she had not acted in love scenes. In <<The Great Empire>> that was just aired recently, she had a love scene with Chen Shuang He, but it was a short scene with Chen Shuang He showing his upper body while she only showed her shoulder—the most intense part was a kiss.

In comparison, <<Elder Brother's Lover>> had too many love scenes...way too many...

1This means to stay up late, originating from a meme that roughly translates into: You're still up? Are you trying to cultivate yourself into an immortal?

Chapter 109

109: Charming Atelier

"I'm taking on this script." Chen Shuang He put the script in his hand down.

Director Chen sat across him with a magazine in hand. "Do you want the role of the elder brother or the younger brother?"

Among the brothers in <<Elder Brother's Woman>>, the elder brother was a famous artist, he spent money as if it were water, he was also romantic and sentimental; the younger brother was a student instead, he was studying in the Chinese department in a university, he loved to read and write, he was silent and moody.

"This pair of brothers pose no difficulty to me at all if I were to act as them separately." Chen Shuang He laughed. "How about letting me act as both of them at the same time?"

Director Chen looked at the person beside him. "What do you think?"

A reticent man was sitting beside him—Li Shan Zhu, a tier one scriptwriter in the country. <<Elder Brother's Lover>> was his work.

He was well known as a man of few words. If he could express himself in three words, he would never use a fourth. He pushed his black-framed glasses up and said to Chen Shuang He, "Show me?"

"Which part?" Chen Shuang He smiled confidently, he extended the script to the other so the other could pick.

"Wait." Director Chen suddenly picked up his mobile phone. "Since we are holding an audition, why not bring the female lead here."

The phone rang for a few times before a woman's voice answered.

"Is this Ning Ning?" Director Chen said with a laugh, "Have you had your dinner? It's good that you have. Are you free at the moment? Can you come over to my house? Yes, it's regarding the script."

Ning Ning arrived at Director Chen's house in no time.

The maid opened the door for her. Just as she entered the hall, before she could greet anyone, Director Chen pointed at her from

where he was. "Hold it. Don't move. Walk over here in Little Ai's manner."

Little Ai was the female lead character for < Elder Brother's Lover > —her full name was Zhang Xin Ai.

In her character specifications, she was a woman who was universally adored. What kind of woman could achieve such a feat? Ning Ning thought she must be very beautiful, she would also smile a lot.

She cracked a smile and walked leisurely towards them. She did not make any seductive gestures, because a woman who was too dissolute in public would be met with disgust. Little Ai dissolutions should only be expressed privately, in front of certain people.

Li Shan Zhu stared at her as she walked over. It was only when Director Chen had gently bumped him with his arm that he closed his eyes, then he slowly opened them and said, "Location: Atelier. Time: After the elder brother had gone missing. Plot: The younger brother was tidying up the old paintings in his brother's atelier. Little Ai came over, seduced him and managed to draw his interest."

Director Chen clapped his hands as if he was on set, "A!"

Both actors were startled at the same time.

Chen Shuang He was the first to come back to his senses. He got up and took a few steps before stopping. There was nothing in front of him but he raised his hand, flipping through sheets—as if there was an easel in front of him, as if there were a few pieces of drawing on it.

He suddenly stopped flipping and stared at the painting in front of him intently.

"The painting and me, which is more beautiful?" A woman's voice suddenly rang out from behind him.

Chen Shuang He was startled. He looked back at her then swiftly looked down bashfully. His was stammering as though he was not used to interacting with women, "Why, why are you here?"

Ning Ning stood behind him and stared at the empty space in front of them as if there was really an easel, a painting. She looked at the painting, her expression looking more and more like she was ruminating. She placed a hand on Chen Shuang He's shoulder and spoke softly and sweetly, "Looks like the me in the painting is more beautiful? Because I'm not wearing anything?"

"That's not it!" Chen Shuang He answered anxiously.

Ning Ning looked at him in astonishment.

There were a lot of people who could portray anxiety, but not many people could do it like he did, his face had even turned red from it.

From this reaction...it seemed like someone had hit the nail on the head.

To cover up his reddened face, he hung his head low. A pair of hands reached out from in front of him, lifting up his scalding hot face.

He was facing her, but his eyes started to wander around.

"Do you want to paint one?"

His eyes stopped moving and fixed themselves on her face.

The hands that were originally on his face slowly retracted. Like a swan folding up its wings, beautiful and graceful as if she was dancing, her fingertips landed on either side of her shoulders, little by little pulling open the coat on her, revealing her soft and round shoulders...

At this time, at this moment, he was already unable to look away from her...

"Cut." Director Chen's voice suddenly rang out. He turned his head to look at Li Shan Zhu. "What do you think?"

Not only was Li Shan Zhu a man of few words, he also did not have opinions of his own either, he did not like to say anything that would offend anyone. He pushed his black-framed glasses, giving the initiative back to Director Chen. "What do you think?"

"Me?" Director Chen smiled vaguely, his eyes shifted onto the two people in front of him and he said blandly, "Neither of them pass."

Both of them were flabbergasted.

"Let's talk about you first." Director Chen said to Chen Shuang He, "Once you had walked into the atelier, what did you see?"

"...Little Ai's portrait." Chen Shuan He composed himself and answered.

"How many pieces are there?" Director Chen asked.

"A lot." Chen Shuang He answered according to his previous actions, "They were on the walls, on the easel; incomplete ones, complete ones; all of them are of her..."

As he said that, he suddenly winced.

"Now answer me," Director Chen coldly asked, "what does that mean?"

"They are all portraits of her..." Chen Shuang He said with difficulty, "Elder Brother must have really loved her."

As a scholarly youth, the younger brother was slender, sensitive and melancholic, he should have been able to figure out something so obvious with one look.

Once he figured it out, would he still be seduced by Little Ai?

"You were too easily seduced." Director Chen shook his head. "Even if the elder brother was not around, his paintings were still around. With those paintings staring at you—as a younger brother who loves and respects your elder brother—how could you be so easily seduced?"

Chen Shuang He could not help but grit his teeth. He looked at Li Shan Zhu who was drinking tea at the corner of his eyes.

Time: After the elder brother had gone missing. Location: Atelier.

So you either don't speak or you set traps with every word you say!

"And you." Director Chen turned his attention to Ning Ning. "Tell me, what is Little Ai best at?"

Ning Ning thought about it carefully, "Putting on a front."

Of the pair of brothers, one of them was smart, the other was sensitive—yet, both of them would be deceived, dancing on the palms of Little Ai. Let alone anyone else, everyone held the opinion that Little Ai was a good woman through and through. There were a few doubts on occasions that she had easily swatted away, she was two-faced to the letter.

"A woman who specialises in putting on a front, a woman who has a watertight facade, would she start to strip for the younger brother so he could paint inside an atelier which allow anyone to walk in at any moment?" Director Chen asked her.

"...She wouldn't," Ning Ning said with difficulty, "she would not take such a risk and would have used a safer method to seduce the younger brother."

"That's right. Go back and think about the details carefully. You have the script, right? Return and look at it more once you get home today, get a grasp of this character." Director Chen turned and looked

at Li Shan Zhu. "Will that do?"

Li Shan Zhu nodded silently.

Ning Ning had wanted to discuss the script and her character with Li Shan Zhu, but she could barely squeeze anything out of him. He would just acknowledge her or tell her to speak most of the time, he himself was unwilling to speak.

There was no point in such discussion, it would be better for her to go over the script by herself at home. After speaking for a while longer, Ning Ning said her farewell and left.

Unexpectedly, Chen Shuang He stood up at the same time. "Let me send you."

Did the sun rise from the west? Ning Ning gave him a strange look. "Wouldn't that trouble you?"

"Let's go." Chen Shuang He picked up his car keys.

He was a big star, but Ning Ning wasn't. Thus, when they went out, Ning Ning would only wear a pair of sunglasses—he, on the other hand, would wear the full set of sunglasses, face mask and hat, only taking his sunglasses off in the car. As the Cayenne sped along the road—within the completely sealed car—he suddenly spoke, his voice rang out from behind the face mask, "< < Elder Brother's Lover > > is adapted from a true story, the female lead was Li Shan Zhu's ex-girlfriend."

Ning Ning turned around and looked at him.

"If I'm not wrong, the younger brother character should be Li Shan Zhu himself." Chen Shuang He touched on the subject lightly while he drove. "Let's book a room tonight."

Ning Ning stumbled in her seat, the pair of sunglasses on her face became slanted, "Book, book a what?"

"Book a hotel room, then go over the script together." Chen Shuang He did not turn and look at her as he was driving. He continued to look towards the front, but his tone was very serious, it didn't sound like he was joking. "He did not say much tonight because he thought that both of us had acted poorly, thus he had nothing to say."

"...Based on your popularity and acting skills, if you don't land the role of the male lead, who else could do it?" Ning Ning asked. Sometimes, a person's acting skills and popularity would not be at the same level—an actor and a star are two different professions. Chen Shuang He, who had both acting skills and popularity, was a top-tier

celebrity, he was seemingly irreplaceable.

"The male lead role is definitely mine, but I'm not satisfied." Chen Shuang He stopped the car in front of the red light, turning his head to stare at her, "What about you? Are you satisfied with this?"

Ning Ning hesitated for a while.

Of course she wasn't satisfied, but...getting a hotel room with the movie emperor in the middle of the night?

After considering it carefully, she shook her head. "It's getting late today, next time."

Chen Shuang He's eyes twinkled, he said blandly, "Alright."

The Cayenne stopped at the foot of Ning Ning's apartment building. Once she politely bid him farewell and watched the car leave, she did not go upstairs back home. For some inexplicable reason, she raised her hand. A taxi had stopped in front of her, she got in the car and closed the door. "35 Rouge Street."

She was filled with doubt once she said that.

She did not have tickets on hand anymore, why was she still going to Life Theater?

"Stop..." She opened her mouth, but when the driver turned around, for some reason, she swallowed her words. "Nothing, continue driving."

The car started and sped towards the neon lights in front of them.

At this time, a Cayenne slowly turned out from the corner of the street. Like a spirit of the night, it followed the taxi silently.

Within the Cayenne, Chen Shuang He looked at the taxi in front of him silently, watching the woman in the car.

Acting skills that improved in leaps and bounds.

Acting skills that were reborn overnight.

It happened to Ning Yu Ren, it happened to her too.

"Tonight." Chen Shuang He's eyes narrowed. "I will find your secret out."

1The Porsche Cayenne is a mid-size luxury crossover sport utility vehicle produced by the German manufacturer Porsche since 2002, with North American sales beginning in 2003.

Chapter 110

110: A Ticket You Cannot Discard

The past could be changed, reality could be changed, but at the very least, Life Theater would never change.

Ning Ning had always thought so in the past.

"There seems to be a group fight ahead," the driver said in a slightly nervous tone, "are you sure you want to get off here?"

Just as his voice faded out, a person flew over and smashed on the taxi with a huge bang.

Both of them exclaimed in fright as they reflexively bent down to dodge it. A few seconds later, Ning Ning slowly raised her head and looked through the cracked window, carefully surveying the scene outside the taxi.

The outside of Life Theater was a mess.

There were masked people all over the ground—some of them were heavily injured, some of them were lightly injured—but even the most lightly injured ones were groaning in pain on the ground, unable to get up at the moment.

At the same time, there were even more masked people rushing out of Life Theater.

Rushing towards the person who was standing in their way—Boss Qu.

"Ahhhhh!!" They screamed their lungs out, the legs of the chairs from the theater as weapons, as if they were a person on the verge of death expending the last of their madness.

The door of the car was yanked open, the person who had been tossed on the taxi got in. It was a woman with thick wavy hair, on her face was a fox mask with long and thin eyes. She said while catching her breath, "Start, start the car quickly... It's you!"

Her first reaction to seeing her was surprise, then ecstasy. "As long as I catch you, Boss Qu would... Ah!"

Boss Qu grabbed her hair and viciously pulled her out of the taxi. He roared into the taxi, "Why are you still in a daze?! Get out of here

quickly!"

Numerous hands reached out from behind him at the same time. Some grabbed him by the throat, some by his waist, there were also a few who ran past him towards Ning Ning.

Ning Ning was frozen in fear, she watched as many hands reached out to her.

"Ah—"

A horrible scream.

One of the arms had turned into ashes.

Boss Qu stood behind him, holding a mask in his hand. The mask that he had just ripped off was warm and fresh. The body that no longer had a mask had crumpled to his knees then turned into ashes. The clothes had fallen to the floor one by one, forming the shape of a human, they very quickly turned into ashes as well. With a gust of the wind, nothing was left.

Ning Ning stared at what happened in a daze, the other masked people also stared at what happened in a daze.

"All of you get back." Boss Qu said coldly, "Don't blame me if I punish you..."

Before he could finish his sentence, he was suddenly astounded, looking straight behind Ning Ning.

What did he see?

Ning Ning also turned around and looked, she was also surprised when she realised that the car behind her was a Cayenne.

Chen Shuang He? Why was he there? Did he tail her...Oh no!

The roof of the taxi suddenly bent down as Boss Qu was standing on it. He rushed towards the Cayenne anxiously.

Before he even got to the Cayenne, his mask had started to burn, crimson undying flames fanned out from his mask to his shoulders, arms then his entire body, turning him into a fiery figure. He fell from the air to the ground, rolling a few times before he started crawling towards the Cayenne again. He shouted and cursed as he crawled, "Why are you stopping me?! You can't stop me! I have been your watchdog for so long, I have already waited for one hundred and two years... He is just in front of me!!!"

"...Oh God! I'm going to call the police!" The driver was unable to

bear the unscientific scene outside. He stepped on the accelerator, the tires were screeching as the car sped off. About three meters later, it suddenly stopped, Ning Ning stumbling out of the car. She took off her coat and put it on Boss Qu.

But the fire could not be put out.

The fire would only burn him, not the clothes, not Ning Ning either. At this time, Chen Shuang He got off from the Cayenne, grabbing her hand and running back in a hurry.

"...Where are you running off to?" Boss Qu could not think straight from having been burned. He watched the two figures running away from him. Through his mask, through the flames, their figures had blurred amongst them, the figures had turned into two other characters, he murmured, "...Don't touch my daughter, I'm right here, come at me."

A voice that sounded like both a human and a beast at the same time rang out from behind Ning Ning.

"Let go." She shook off Chen Shuang He's hand. She looked back.

A sea of fire.

The masked people were screaming painfully in the flames. They wanted to run away, but they would turn into a flaming person before they could get far. There was no escape, there was no retreat. They cried, shouted and screamed. One by one, they would either walk or crawl back into the entrance of Life Theater. The instant they entered through the entrance of Life Theater, the fire on their bodies would be extinguished immediately.

There was only one person whose fire was still burning.

"One hundred and two years, one hundred and two years...I cannot wait anymore..." Boss Qu laid prone on the ground, crawling towards the two figures with difficulty, with flames on his body and tears in his eyes. "Even if I cannot kill, at least let me take a bite, just a bite...let me vent my hatred!"

Ning Ning took a deep breath then suddenly rushed towards him.

"Wait!" Chen Shuang He reached out to grab her but did not manage to grab anything. He took two steps forward but was forced back by the hatred in Boss Qu's expression. This was really a head scratcher. Had he ever met this person, no—this superhuman—before? Why did he look like he had a deep hatred against him?

Ning Ning walked gingerly into the fire. The flames brushed past

her legs, but it was cooling like a breeze. She breathed a sigh of relief. This fire could only burn the mask people, it couldn't burn her.

She helped Boss Qu up. He was too heavy, causing her to stagger.

"Papa, don't be sad," she said quietly, "I'm back."

"...Ah." Boss Qu struggled on her shoulders, then he relaxed and called out quietly, "Ning'er..."

Ning Ning helped him into the entrance with difficulty. She had wanted to go in together, but he reached out and pushed her away. One of them went forward, the other went backward, then the entrance slammed shut abruptly with a loud crash, completely separating the two.

Ning Ning took two steps back, then she slowly looked up.

Life Theater that seemed to be forever open had closed its doors. The wall which had a new poster every night currently had a blank poster. Finally, the two lines of white lanterns at the entrance—from the start, to the end—were turning red one by one.

The wind blew, the two lines of blood lanterns at the entrance gently swayed.

"...What exactly is happening in there?" Ning Ning muttered.

A hand suddenly placed itself on her shoulder. She turned around and was met with Chen Shuang He's eyes. He said in a low voice, "Give me an explanation."

Explanation? How would she explain herself? Tell him that that was his great grandfather's adversary who should have been burnt to death but was now detained by the theater to be a half-dead doorman as he waited for his arrival?

She was afraid that the moment she finished speaking, she would be sent to the mental institute.

"I don't really get what's going on either." Thus she said while forcing a smile.

"Really?" Chen Shuang He stared at her with suspicion. "You seem to be very familiar with that person just now."

Ning Ning, "You saw wrongly."

"If you weren't familiar, why would you rush into the fire to save him for no reason?" Chen Shuang He asked.

"A human life is at stake, I was just doing a good deed." Ning Ning

raised her arms and took a look, then she exclaimed, "That's strange, with such a big fire, why aren't even the corners of my clothes burnt off?"

Chen Shuang He frantically grabbed her arm to check. As she said, both her and her clothes were fine, there were no signs of them getting burned. How was that possible? Was what just happened an illusion?

With the unexplainable incident and being unable to get an answer from Ning Ning, she let go of Ning Ning's arm and went up to the door and gave it a few knocks, but no one answered, he looked back at Ning Ning again, Ning Ning gave him an innocent look.

"Since the movie theater is operating here, I will definitely be able to find out who owns it." Chen Shuang He said coldly, "Even if you don't tell me, I will get to the bottom of this."

Who opened the movie theater? Ning Ning's eyes sparkled, she took out her phone. "Please inform me once you figure it out. That's right, what's your WeChat account? Can you let me scan your QR code?"

Chen Shuang He, "..."

After adding each other on WeChat, Chen Shuang He sent Ning Ning back home.

This time, Ning Ning did not intend to wander around anymore. She rubbed her face that was reflected in the mirror, took off her coat and prepared to change into her pajamas.

A piece of paper fluttered down from the pocket of her coat.

"Hmm?" Ning Ning looked down at that piece of paper. She slowly bent down to pick it up.

Once she had a clear look at the content of the paper, the look on her face darkened.

She had held many different kinds of Life Theater tickets in the past, but undoubtedly, the ticket in her hand was the most exquisite of them all.

Its texture was harder than regular tickets, but it was as light as papyrus. On it was a stamp of a half-length photograph. The photograph seemed to depict a woman with slightly wavy long hair.

Wasn't that the woman who had opened the taxi door and almost grabbed her?

"Did she secretly stuff this in my pocket?" Ning Ning hesitated for a

moment before tossing the ticket into the toilet bowl then flushing it down.

Unless it's a last resort, never accept a ticket from a staff member—she still remembered Mama's exhortation.

"I cannot keep the ticket of a staff member." Ning Ning looked on as the tiny whirlpool in the toilet bowl slowly subsided. She murmured, "Not to mention a ticket that had been secretly stuffed into my pocket by a staff member."

Once she dealt with the ticket, she went back to her normal life.

She made another trip to Director Chen's house on the next day. Chen Shuang He was there as well. Both of them were distracted—seemingly because of the incident from the previous day—causing them to get a scolding from Director Chen after a few takes. It was Li Shan Zhu who defended them from the side, which made Director Chen's rage temporarily subside. He waved his hand impatiently. "I'll give you two another week. Go back and think carefully about how you want to portray this."

A week, this was already the limit of Director Chen's patience.

If they still could not meet his expectations by then, he might really swap them out with other actors.

Ning Ning returned home dejectedly. When she was about to take her keys out, she was surprised. She slowly took her hand out from her pocket.

On her palm were a key and a movie ticket.

On the ticket was a stamp, on the stamp was a woman with wavy hair.

"Why is it back?" Ning Ning furrowed her brows.

This time, she simply burned it up then flushed the remains down the toilet bowl.

Subsequently, when she turned her head while she was still half asleep the next morning, that ticket was lying on the pillow by her side without a scratch, the woman with the wavy hair on the stamp was looking at her on her side.

"What's going on?" Ning Ning sat up. She held the movie ticket, then flipped and looked at it for a long time before muttering to herself, "The reason one should not accept a ticket from a staff member...don't tell me, it's because you cannot get rid of it?"

Her guess was confirmed.

Afterwards, she tested a lot of methods—drowning it in water, burning it in fire, shipping it overseas—besides giving it to another person, she had tried every other method, but it was of no use. The next morning, the wavy hair woman would always be there on the pillow, looking at Ning Ning while lying on her side.

"This is the last method." Ning Ning looked down at the ticket in her hand, then slowly looked up, up at Life Theater that was in front of her.

Besides dealing with the ticket and thinking of how to portray Little Ai for these few days, she would occasionally take a taxi ride to Life Theater. Yet, every time she was here, the theater would be shut, the poster on the wall would always be blank, but the two lines of blood red lanterns were slowly fading, like blood that had already dried.

What happened to Boss Qu? What happened to Shi Zhong Tang? Ning Ning hesitated for a moment before she walked up and knocked on the door. "Is anyone there?"

No one answered. She tugged on the chain on the door. Unexpectedly, the chain actually fell to the ground. The door wasn't even locked.

Ning Ning held the door handle and pushed on to reveal a small crack.

"Never ever sneak in without a ticket!" Ning Yu Ren's exhortation flashed across her mind. She retracted her leg that was already lifted up, trying to step inside.

She bent over slightly while standing at the doorway, peeking in through the crack of the door. The interior was pitch black, she could not see anything. After a long while, an indistinct shadow appeared. It looked a little like Shi Zhong Tang. She opened her mouth—just as she was about to call out to him, someone suddenly pushed her from behind...

"Ah!" Ning Ning exclaimed as she fell inwards.

The masked people who were walking around had stopped moving.

A red light shone on Ning Ning.

She slowly looked up and saw that the entire screen had lit up, but it was not the usual white light—a scarlet red light, like the red lanterns at the entrance. After a while, a number even appeared on it. It was '10', but after a second, it turned into '9'.

Clomp, clomp, clomp. The sound of footsteps approached her. Boss Qu stood by her side, panting. "What are you doing here? Do...do you have any tickets on you? Quick, quickly, any ticket will do, quickly give it to me!!"

Ning Ning had never seen him so anxious, so anxious he was sweating like a pig, he could not even speak properly.

She frantically took out the only ticket she had on her.

Boss Qu snatched the ticket out of her hand before she could hand it over, saying in a hurry, "One person per ticket, invalid... A main character ticket?"

The number on the screen had already counted down to '3'. Boss Qu glanced at the number, trembling as he tore the ticket. "Invalid upon admission...Ning Ning, who is trying to sabotage you?"

"I don't know." Ning Ning sat on the floor with a confounded look. "I was pushed in."

The moment the ticket was torn, the number on the screen had just turned to '1'.

The number '1' on the screen stopped and stopped counting down, even the red on the screen slowly faded, from the left to right, the red slowly turned into white.

White light illuminated Ning Ning's body, she breathed a sigh of relief, this was when she realised that she had been sweating. Red light was illuminating Boss Qu's body.

"...You were pushed in?" He murmured before abruptly rushing out of the entrance.

Chapter 111

111: Back to the Beginning

Who was the one who had pushed her?

Ning Ning wanted to go out and take a look as well, but someone pressed her shoulders down.

"There's not much time. I talk, you listen." Shi Zhong Tang had appeared in front of her without her noticing. He grabbed her shoulders with both hands and helped her up from the floor.

"The ticket you had just used was a main character ticket, every masked person has one—their portraits are on it." Shi Zhong Tang said, "You still remember, right? I took three of them, used three of them—after the third time, I turned into what I am now."

He smiled as he knocked on the jade mask on his face with his finger, which in turn made a crisp sound.

"But I didn't take this ticket out of my own free will, someone had stuffed it in my pocket." Ning Ning said doubtfully, "That counts too?"

"Then you really should thank her." Shi Zhong Tang thought for a moment before smiling. "If not for this ticket, you would have been deemed to have snuck in right now."

Ning Ning suddenly had a thought, she asked, "What's the consequence of sneaking in?"

"If you have time to think about that, why not think about this movie?" Shi Zhong Tang said with a serious expression, "Ning Ning, do you know what is the biggest difference between main character tickets and other tickets?"

He was always grinning cheekily, it was rare for him to speak to her in such a serious tone. Once she determined the gravity of the matter, Ning Ning temporarily put the matter of sneaking in aside. She looked at him and asked, "What's the difference?"

"No matter if it's an ordinary ticket or a designated ticket, you get to decide whether or not you want to change the fate of the main character, but a main character ticket is different. The decision lies with the person who gave you the ticket. They will usually give you a limitation at the start of the movie." Shi Zhong Tang said, "For

example, when I had transmigrated as the conman, the limitation I was given was that I could not earn money by cheating people and had to do it the lawful way."

"What if you ignored this limitation and forcibly cheated someone out of their money?" Ning Ning decided to get a hold of the worst case scenario after thinking about it for a while.

"If you ignored the limitation..." Shi Zhong Tang smiled, "You would go back to the beginning."

Go back to the beginning?

What does that mean?

Ning Ning still wanted to get to the bottom of it, but the main theme had already started playing. It was the voice of a woman, singing in a languid and charming voice, "So many men, they all love me. Elder brother and younger brother, which one do I choose?"

A sense of weightlessness came over her. Shi Zhong Tang's lips were opening and closing in front of her, but Ning Ning could not make out a thing he was saying. His voice was distorted along with his face. When her vision cleared up again, she was already standing in an atelier.

It was evening. The setting sun looked like a melting egg yolk. The wind was blowing from the window, causing the white curtains, the paper on the easel and her long hair to flutter around in the breeze.

"Limitation." A woman's voice suddenly rang out by her ear, languid and charming, it was the voice from the theme song. "Portray my role completely. You cannot say what I won't say, cannot do what I won't do."

"What?" Ning Ning was taken aback.

What kind of limitation was that?

Hadn't she been doing that all along? She had treated Life Theater as a place to hone her acting skills. She would always try her best to portray each character, not saying anything the character would not say, not doing anything the character would not do.

With a creak, the door behind her suddenly opened.

Ning Ning turned her head and saw a young man standing at the doorway. He was nineteen or twenty years old with an elegant face, wearing black frame glasses. The shape of his eyebrows made him look troubled. He was hugging a book titled <<No Longer

Human > >. On the surface, he looked like a university student from the literature department.

This face was so very familiar. Wasn't this...a younger version of the scriptwriter Li Shan Zhu?

"Li Shan Zhu?" Ning Ning probed as she called out.

"Big Sister Little Ai." Sure enough, he answered as he walked over with the book in his arms. His eyes were shifty as he did not dare to look at her straight in the eyes. "Are you here to pack up brother's paintings too?"

Brother's paintings?

Ning Ning turned and looked at the easel.

A gust of wind had kicked up just then, flipping through the papers affixed on the easel—the first piece, the second piece, the third piece...a few consecutive pieces were showing paintings of the same person. It was a woman with beautiful wavy hair like the waves of the Aegean Sea¹. Her smile, too, was very beautiful, like the smile Venus gave you the moment you opened up the shell of the scallop.²

Ning Ning realised that she also recognised this face.

It was the girl who had sent her home along with Wen Yu at the ending of < < Dreams of the Future > >. She was still childlike that year, but now, in the painting, she had matured like a peach.

What was her name?

Connecting it together with the 'Little Ai' which Li Shan Zhu had said just now, Ning Ning reckoned that her name was most probably the name in the script, Zhang Xin Ai.

What about the plot? Would it be the same as the script?

Li Shan Zhu walked past Ning Ning, placing his copy of < > on the table by the side. His fair and slender fingers reached out to the paintings on the easel, removing the paintings on the easel one by one. When he was removing one of the paintings, his body froze. He glanced back at Ning Ning in a panic, his face was already completely red.

There was a nude painting on the easel.

To a pure university student, the painting was too stimulating. Zhang Xin Ai was reclining on the sofa by the window, no piece of cloth was on her. She was draped in sunlight and her long hair, her fair skin had pale red love bites that looked as if flower petals had

fallen on her.

Atelier, hiding a painting, Zhang Xin Ai, Li Shan Zhu.

Didn't she see this setting before?

It was completely the same setting as <<Elder Brother's Lover>>.

According to the script, Ning Ning should go up and seduce him at this moment, but she gave up on it once she thought it through.

After experiencing the events of <<My Angel>>, Ning Ning realised that the script was completely unreliable. What did 'adapted from a true story' mean? It meant that through artistic processing, the story would only be half-true, completely following the script would only spoil things.

"Why are you dragging your feet?" Thus, Ning Ning did not seduce him. She crossed her arms and blandly urged him on, "Any slower and the sky would get dark."

"...Ok." Li Shan Zhu answered quietly. She could not make out whether he was shy or disappointed. He continued to pack up the paintings on the easel. In an act of desperation, he tore the nude painting without giving it a second thought.

Ning Ning shook her head. Just as she was about to go up and help him, she suddenly received a shock.

The torn painting had reverted back to its original condition, Li Shan Zhu put the paintings back one by one with extremely fast speed. Once he was done, he walked backwards out of the atelier. Everything happened so fast that Ning Ning could barely see what was happening.

The door closed with a thud.

Ning Ning was the only person left in the atelier.

She felt the wind on her body, her back felt cold, what exactly happened?

With a creak, the door behind her suddenly opened.

Ning Ning turned her head and saw Li Shan Zhu standing at the doorway while hugging his copy of <<No Longer Human>>.

"Li Shan Zhu?" Ning Ning looked at him with doubt and surprise.

"Big Sister Little Ai." Li Shan Zhu's eyes were shifty as he did not dare to look at her straight in the eyes. "Are you here to pack up

brother's paintings too?"

Ning Ning was astounded, what the heck was he doing?

Li Shan Zhu walked past Ning Ning, placing his copy of <<No Longer Human>> on the table by the side. His fair and slender fingers reached out to the paintings on the easel, removing the paintings on the easel one by one. When he was removing one of the paintings, his body froze. He glanced back at Ning Ning in a panic, his face was already completely red.

Ning Ning had thought that he was a little dumb and cute earlier, but she only felt shivers now.

"Li Shan Zhu," She asked while shivering, "what the heck are you doing going in and out of the room?"

Li Shan Zhu was stunned for a moment. Then, the weird scene happened again. The paintings went back to their original position one by one, he then walked backwards past Ning Ning, the door closing with a thud.

After only a few seconds later, the door opened with a creak again, he once again stood at the doorway while hugging his <<No Longer Human>> book, gazing at her.

This repeated for three or four more times before Ning Ning finally understood what Shi Zhong Tang meant by "going back to the beginning".

The main character held the power for the main character ticket, not the audience.

The initiative for the movie Ning Ning was in the hands of Zhang Xin Ai instead of hers.

According to the limitations Zhang Xin Ai had set for her, Ning Ning could not say what Zhang Xin Ai wouldn't say, could not do what Zhang Xin Ai wouldn't do. On the first loop, Ning Ning was supposed to seduce Li Shan Zhu but didn't do so. The second time, Ning Ning said something she shouldn't have, thus the movie had rewound straight back to the opening.

"In other words, if I don't act according to her request..." Ning Ning murmured, "I will have to act in this movie forever."

The door opened with a creak, Li Shan Zhu was standing at the doorway, hugging his copy of <<No Longer Human>>.

"Li Shan Zhu?"

"Big Sister Little Ai, are you here to pack up brother's paintings too?"

Skipping ahead the familiar opening, Li Shan Zhu stood in front of the nude painting, turning his head to look at Ning Ning.

This seduction was unavoidable.

Ning Ning slowly cracked a sweet smile and walked forward.

She was thinking with every step she was taking, "If I were Zhang Xin Ai, how would I seduce him? I cannot let anyone find out, I cannot make him hate me either, and more importantly, I cannot leave any obvious loopholes..."

She stood still in front of the painting, her smile turning a little melancholic.

"They are all paintings of me," she muttered, "he must have loved me a lot."

Li Shan Zhu was taken aback, then he acknowledged it before lowering his head.

The wind breeze was blowing onto their body, the atelier was silent save for the sound of rustling paper.

"I want to paint." Ning Ning suddenly said, "He painted so many pictures of me, but I have not done a single one of him...Shan Zhu."

Li Shan Zhu did not think that she would suddenly call his name out, he was caught off guard for a moment before answering, "I'm here, what is it?"

"Can you do me a favour?" Ning Ning looked at him, tucking her hair behind her ears.

Li Shan Zhu only took a glance at her before lowering his head again, his voice was serious and sincere as he answered, "Anything."

Ning Ning, "Be my model."

Li Shan Zhu looked slightly dumbstruck, "Huh?"

"You look a lot like your brother." Ning Ning reached out with the hand that had just tucked her hair behind her ears. Her fingers were slender and had a hint of the aroma of her shampoo—it was a rich fragrance of rose. She gazed at him deeply, like she was looking at him, like she was looking at another person through him. She said mildly, "He's not around, can you substitute for him temporarily?"

On the surface, she was asking him to temporarily substitute his

brother to be a model (in her painting).

But with a slightest bit of inattention, it could also be interpreted as something else...

But she had portrayed such deep affection for his brother, how could there be another meaning? Thinking of more than that would be defiling her. Li Shan Zhu's eyebrows started to twitch violently, he answered in a low voice, "Ok... I will be here whenever you need me."

Ning Ning started to smile gently, a smile that looked exactly like the person in the painting, like the goddess of love, Venus, who had descended upon the mortal realm when the scallop shell opened on the shore.

Li Shan Zhu's face was turning bright red bit by bit. She slowly retracted her hand and took her mobile phone out. She said, "Hold on, let me look at my calendar."

She had originally wanted to confirm the date then tell him to come over during the weekend, but she was quickly startled once she unlocked the phone.

"What's the matter?" Li Shan Zhu was a very delicate and sensitive person, he seemed to have immediately noticed that something was off with Ning Ning.

"...It's nothing." Ning Ning immediately smiled as usual. "It was on silent mode, I just noticed that there were a few missed calls... Today is Wednesday, do you have anything on the weekend? If not, can we meet here at nine this weekend?"

"Ok." Li Shan Zhu answered, then he took a glance at her before quickly shifting his eyes away. He said with a red face, "Actually, I don't have many classes recently, I can come anytime you want."

"Then take a photo of your timetable and send it to me when you get back." Ning Ning smiled as she waved the phone in her hand. "Let's meet up next time."

After the two of them agreed, they started to pack up the things in the atelier. This was the personal atelier of Li Shan Zhu's brother. He had temporarily left and never returned afterwards. The atelier had remained the way it was when he had left, the window was not even closed, if there had been a storm the atelier would have been a mess.

The two of them left once they packed up the paintings and closed the window.

"Big Sister Little Ai, let me send you back." Li Shan Zhu said.

"Sure." Ning Ning did not reject him, because she did not know where Zhang Xin Ai was currently living.

Li Shan Zhu sent her to the third floor of an apartment building then left. She only had four keys. She tested them out one by one, it didn't take much time before she managed to open the door.

There were three rooms and a living room, it was fully furnished and elegantly decorated, there were even a lot of famous paintings on the walls. Ning Ning did not have any interest in trying to see if the paintings were genuine. She sat on the sofa and quickly took out her phone.

"So that's how it is." She gritted her teeth. "No wonder you gave me such a limitation."

A memorandum was open on the phone.

It seemed that before she had transmigrated here, Zhang Xin Ai was standing in the atelier while recording something in the memorandum.

What was written on it was...

1The Aegean Sea is an elongated embayment of the Mediterranean Sea located between the Greek and Anatolian peninsulas.

2This is a reference to the birth of the goddess Venus who was born out of a from a giant scallop shell.

Chapter 112

112: Back to the Beginning

"Shake off the three of them as soon as possible, then be together with him forever."

Ning Ning stared at the memorandum.

The "three of them" and another "him" on top of it, that would mean that Zhang Xin Ai was having ambiguous relationships with at least four different men.

The question was, who was "he"? Who were the three other men?

The quickest way to test it out would be to send a message to every number on the phone and write, "Let's break up."

The people whom she had a relationship with would ask: "What's wrong?", "Give me a reason.", "Do you have someone else on the outside?", "Let's meet up and talk it out.", etc.

The others on the other hand would reply: "You sent this to the wrong person.", "Haha, the pretty girl broke up? I have a chance now!", "Wow, when did you have a boyfriend?", "Is that you?", etc.

But Ning Ning could not do such a thing.

Because of the limitation, she could not say what Zhang Xin Ai wouldn't say, could not do what Zhang Xin Ai wouldn't do.

Something like this which would severely hurt the image of Zhang Xin Ai, she could not do...

Wait a minute, could she really not do it?

Ning Ning picked a person randomly from the contact list. She typed a message which only had three words: "Let's break up."

She tapped on the send button.

Her vision turned black.

"Big Sister Little Ai, let me send you back."

Ning Ning turned her head and met the somewhat shy and expectant eyes of Li Shan Zhu, behind him was the locked door of the atelier.

"...Sure." She smiled.

Half an hour later, Ning Ning had returned to the apartment building once again. This time, she did not have to try and had opened the door with the first key she used. Afterwards, she laid on the sofa.

"Back to the beginning," she muttered, "not to the very beginning of the movie, but the beginning of the current scene."

There were a lot of scenes in a movie, the atelier was one scene, going home was another scene.

"...Troublesome." Ning Ning mumbled as she unlocked the phone again and looked at the memorandum, "Can't you restart after I have read the reply? In this situation, how should I know who your four little lovers are?"

If she could look at the reply before she had to restart, then even if it was tedious, Ning Ning would be able to slowly find out who the four people mentioned in the memorandum were—but Zhang Xin Ai obviously did not want to give her that chance.

In this situation where she did not know who exactly those four people were, what were the chances of Ning Ning being able to find the "him" mentioned in the memorandum?

"Maybe this is what you want?" Ning Ning smiled. On the table was half a glass of water, she raised the glass and toasted with the air in front of her. "Amazing. I don't know exactly who your true love is at all, so the chances of me getting together with a random person...is almost a hundred percent. Who could resist Little Miss Perfect? Then I would have changed your future, right?"

She gulped down the water in the glass then viciously put the glass back down on the table.

The water had been placed there for a day, it had already gone cold long ago, drinking it down in one gulp cooled her heart. Ning Ning wiped the cold water off the corners of her mouth with a cold stare. "Not that easy!"

Even if there were no records of messages, there were records of calls.

From top to bottom—found it, the number she had called the most recently was 133xxxxxxx, his name was 'Big Brother Hai'.

Ning Ning thought about it before sending him a message: [I have not had dinner.]

Not even two seconds after the message was sent, he called back and said with a mellow voice, "I'll treat you."

Around ten minutes later, Ning Ning went downstairs.

A Benz1 stopped at the entrance of the apartment, leaning on the car was a man wearing a flower shirt, sunglasses and a gold watch on his wrist. This getup was enough to make anyone look laughable, but no one would have laughed at him, because behind the pair of sunglasses was the face of the richest of the city.

He opened the door for Ning Ning, on the seat was a paper bag.

"What is it?" Ning Ning asked.

"Open it up and take a look." He smiled.

In the paper bag was a little box. Once you opened the box, there was a diamond ring which refracted the brilliance of the night lights.

He was rich and romantic. Ning Ning turned her head to look at Big Brother Hai's side profile, this was a pretty good choice for a lover.

"Do you like it?" He asked with a smile.

"I do."

"Then try it on."

Ning Ning put the ring on her ring finger then opened up her fingers to look at it, she smiled. "It fits just right."

"Then can you explain it to me?" Big Brother Hai smiled. "Why would my son suddenly spend money on a diamond ring? A diamond ring which has the abbreviation of your name carved on the inside, moreover...it fits you perfectly when you put it on."

Ning Ning looked at him in astonishment.

The night was too dark, the lights in the car were especially dim, so she could not see the expression on Big Brother Hai's face. She only knew that he was smiling, but there were many types of smiles, there were joyous smiles, there were also angry smiles.

Big Brother Hai suddenly stepped on the accelerator, the Benz speeding up.

Ning Ning fell back onto her seat, crying out in fear, "What are you doing?"

"Doing you in!" Big Brother Hai laughed out.

The car was speeding up, it sped past the Santana in front of it, then bumped a BMW out of the way. One by one, cars were left behind them, one by one, car owners shouted at them from behind, but the Benz was not going to stop. Within the car that was going faster and faster, Big Brother Hai roared with laughter.

Remain calm. Ning Ning was breaking out in cold sweat. She clenched both her fists and told herself: Ning Ning, you have to calm down!

"Even if it just so happened to fit, it doesn't mean anything..." She puffed her chest and forced a smile. "You said so yourself, it was the abbreviation of my name, it's not my name..."

"Enough!!" Big Brother Hai shouted out. He hammered the steering wheel ferociously with his right hand while looking fiercely at Ning Ning, "Little Ke has already spat out everything, you are dating him!"

"Watch, watch the road!" Ning Ning could not help but shout, "If you have anything to say, let's sit down and talk! Get Little Ke to come out so the three of us can talk things out!"

"You still want to meet him?" Big Brother Hai immediately let go of the steering wheel and grabbed her collar. He looked at her with two red eyes as he breathed heavily. "Tell me, when have I let you down? I've bought you anything you wanted, I even got you the female lead role in that previous show with my money. How have you treated me in return? Huh? You actually seduced my son behind my back?"

"Stop the car quickly!!" Ning Ning screamed.

The Benz that no one was steering sped into a big truck.

With a crash...

Flames erupted like a firework shooting into the sky, at the same time, there were broken pieces of a car and fresh blood along with Ning Ning's scream, "I'm someone who has transmigrated here!"

The sparks in the air suddenly went back to the ground, the broken pieces on the ground reformed into a Benz, the Benz sped backwards from the road back to the foot of the apartment building.

Upstairs in the apartment, Ning Ning suddenly opened her eyes as she gasped for air. The phone in her hands suddenly rang. She looked down, her finger trembling uncontrollably.

She tapped on the answer button, Big Brother Hai's voice rang out, "I'll treat you."

Ning Ning did not want to go downstairs at all. Eventually, the phone in her hand was ringing non-stop like a curse. Every time she answered it she would hear the same thing: "I'll treat you", "I'll treat you", "I'll treat you".

The scene repeated non-stop.

She continuously returned back to the beginning of the scene.

It was essentially an excruciating torture, the torment was enough to make one go mad. After the fifty-eighth loop, Ning Ning finally went downstairs begrudgingly.

A perfectly intact Benz was parked at the entrance, Big Brother Hai was leaning on the side of the car and smiling at her from afar.

This smile might look perfect, but it was full of murderous intent.

"Zhang Xin Ai, what kind of awful mess did you leave me in?" Ning Ning could not help but mutter in her heart as she looked at him.

Of the four men mentioned in the memorandum, she had now known two of them. One of them was standing in front of her right now, the problem was...shake off? How would she shake him off at this moment?

"Why drive?" Ning Ning smiled at him, "Let's go eat nearby."

"Hop on." Big Brother Hai opened the car door. "What's there to eat nearby? Let me bring you to somewhere good."

Based on the decorations in Zhang Xin Ai's house along with her branded clothes and makeup, she was someone who took pleasure in going after branded goods and high quality stuff, the nearby KFC and restaurant were definitely unlike her choice—at least, with the availability of a better choice, she would not make do with those places.

Ning Ning could only get in the car. This time, she did not sit in the front, taking the backseat instead.

But Big Brother Hai tossed the paper bag at her, "Take a look inside."

Ning Ning hugged the paper bag as if she was hugging a bomb. Big Brother Hai had urged her thrice more before she unwillingly opened the paper bag to reveal the little box which held the incriminating evidence.

"Open it up." Big Brother Hai said.

Ning Ning slowly opened the box. At this point in time, the diamond ring had yet been stained by her blood, it was sparkling and resplendent.

"Do you like it?" Big Brother Hai asked with a smile. Although he was smiling, on his hand that was on the steering wheel, the veins were popping.

"I do."

"Then try it on."

"I don't want to." Ning Ning rejected him. She reached out her hand to the side of his face and said coquettishly, "Put it on for me."

Big Brother Hai took the ring out of her palm with slight impatience. He put it on her ring finger boorishly. It fit her perfectly. He took a glance and laughed coldly. "Can you explain for me?" Big Brother Hai smiled. "Why would my son suddenly spend money on a diamond ring—a diamond ring which has the abbreviation of your name carved on the inside, moreover...it fits you perfectly when you put it on."

She was not beside him, but her fingers started to dance mischievously by his cheek, the ring sparkling on her finger. She dragged out the last syllable as she said lazily and charmingly, "Because he likes me."

Big Brother Hai stepped on the brake ferociously. The car stopped on the road. He got off from the car then viciously pulled open the backdoor, but before he could do anything, the person inside had pounced on him. She grabbed his collar and tugged it hard. He was caught off guard as he fell head first into the car.

The woman was on the bottom while the man was on top.

A pair of soft arms were wrapped around his neck, pulling his face close to her own. She giggled. "But I like you."

"...What are you doing?" Big Brother Hai looked a little flustered as he struggled to try and get up.

But Ning Ning did not let him go. She knew that he was a proud man, a very proud man. Otherwise, he would not have come over to perish together with her. Now that the car had stopped on the road with so many people passing by, so many cars—some of those cars and people had already stopped and looked in their direction out of curiosity.

"Quickly let go!" The proud Big Brother Hai almost broke out in

sweat. He started to soften up. "There, there. Stop making a scene. I will buy anything for you."

That was when Ning Ning let go with a grin.

Big Brother Hai hurriedly crawled out of the car and returned to the driver's seat. He stepped on the accelerator and drove the car out of the crowd's sight.

He took a look at the rear view mirror. Ning Ning was already lying on her side on the backseat, her comfortable demeanour made her look like a cat. She smiled as she admired the ring on her finger. "I don't lack suitors, it doesn't make a difference with or without your son."

"You little bitch!" Big Brother Hai scolded.

"You can't do anything but dote on a little bitch like me." Ning Ning licked her lower lip at him.

The car suddenly turned into a dark and empty alley, Ning Ning heard him get off the car. The door beside her was abruptly opened. He came in and held the back of her head with his hand, his lips coming up against hers.

In the darkness, the sound of a kiss.

The kiss was so long that when their lips eventually parted, both of them were out of breath.

"I am a big star." Ning Ning said after catching her breath, "There are so many people wooing me. Your son is not the only person who has given me rings. Are you going to throw a jealous fit every time?"

"Big star my ass. You wouldn't even be one if your Big Brother Hai had not bought your fame for you." Big Brother Hai sneered. It didn't matter if she was sneered at or looked at with contempt, at least he didn't sound like he wanted to murder her anymore.

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief. She wiped her mouth and thought this was good.

The moment he drove them into the big truck, Ning Ning had remembered something.

At the end of < <Elder Brother's Lover> >, Zhang Xin Ai died. She was killed by a certain lover. It was not written who the murderer was specifically, but the time of death was clearly stated—18 July 2004—which was also the coming weekend. If that was the true time of death, it meant that the movie would end this weekend.

Before that day, she absolutely could not die.

"Hello." Outside of the car, Big Brother Hai was currently on the phone with his hand on his hip, speaking in an ostentatious tone, "Little bastard, I gave her the ring for you. She said she likes it a lot... What?! You actually dare to scold your old man?! Do you know who she is? She is my mistress!"

Holy crap...

1The Benz is an abbreviation to Mercedes-Benz, a German car maker.

Chapter 113

113: The Most Dangerous Boyfriend

After dinner, Big Brother Hai wanted to invite Ning Ning to a hotel to for a drink. *Haha, go to a hotel just for a drink?*

"No, I have to work tomorrow." Ning Ning rejected the love scene that would have followed and tried to change the topic on top of that. "Right, what did Little Ke say to you?"

Ning Ning had only heard the front part of the argument between father and son. The two of them had used their hometown vernacular towards the end, it was a dialect that was foreign to her—it was like doing a level 6 English listening exam!

"He will not bother you again." Big Brother Hai said smugly, "Otherwise, your Big Brother Hai would cut off his water supply! Cut off his food supply! Would you believe me when I say that he would not even be able to afford a packet of Want Want Shelly Senbei1 without your Big Brother Hai around?"

I believe it! Economic sanctions from the father!

"I would even send him back to our old home! There are more beasts than humans over there—he can switch careers to be a veterinarian!"

"Wait!" Ning Ning said with surprise, "He's a doctor?"

"Heh, not quite, a medical student."

Medical student! Help! Number one of the top ten most dangerous professions for an ex-boyfriend!

Ning Ning returned home anxiously and fearfully. It was pitch black in her house, she had flicked the light switch on, the bright light expelled the darkness in front of her and gave her a fright!

Because someone was standing in front of her! A stranger!

"Wh..." Ning Ning took a step back out of fright. Just as she was about to ask who the person was and whether he was after her money or her body, she saw that he looked at her with a single tear rolling down from his right eye, seamlessly falling to the ground like a pearl.

He was a handsome young man—a handsome young man who

looked like someone who knew her. A pendant was hanging on his neck, but it was not a crystal nor Buddha, it was the key to Ning Ning's house!

Thus, Ning Ning changed her words halfway through, "...Why didn't you turn on the lights?"

"I'm afraid of looking at your face." The handsome young man said coldly.

Pain suddenly shot through her chest. Ning Ning looked down and saw that a scalpel had been forcefully stabbed into her chest...

She slowly looked up and asked quaveringly, "Little Ke?"

"Don't say my name with your dirty mouth." Little Ke scolded her ferociously. He pulled the scalpel out. "You actually had a thing with my father! How could there be a woman as disgusting as you in this world?! Go to hell!!"

Before he could stab again with his scalpel, he heard a slap, Little Ke was dumbfounded.

He watched as Ning Ning slapped herself with one hand then another in quick succession continuously. She used so much force that the wound on her chest started to spurt out blood which sprayed out on Little Ke's entire face. He looked at her in a daze as she shouted while slapping herself, "Medical student! Number one of the top ten most dangerous professions for an ex-boyfriend! Out of all the people to offend, I just had to offend a medical student! Do you believe that he will stab you three hundred times? Every stab would be non-lethal, finally they would be declared as minor injuries..."

Collapse of character designation!

Back to the beginning!

Ning Ning stood breathless at the door to her house, holding a key in her hand that was already slotted into the keyhole.

Should she open this door?

...Forget her house, forget the person inside as well! Oh that was not right, she was still muddled from being murdered. The person inside was not hers at all, he was the responsibility Zhang Xin Ai had left behind, she refused to take it up!

Ning Ning turned around and left, holding her chest as she walked away. The hole in her chest had now closed up but she still felt a dull pain. She even glanced down from time to time as she walked down

the stairs, afraid that she would see blood the moment she took her hand off her chest.

Down the stairs, as she tried to take a step out of the entrance, Ning Ning abruptly stopped in her tracks, staring at the view in front of her.

It was not a road with heavy traffic in front of her, it was a door instead.

On the door a bunch of keys was dangling—the keys to her house. She had returned to the entrance of her house!

Ning Ning refused to believe it! She ran downstairs a few more times... Alright, she believed it!

The route would always lead to the same place—the entrance to her house. The beginning of this scene, a world without end, a world with no escape.

Ning Ning had no choice but to reach out for the door in front of her. Her fingers were trembling as she pushed open the door to reveal a crack, darkness spreading out from within like a tide.

She walked into the door and closed it back up.

This time, Ning Ning did not immediately turn on the lights. She leaned on the door and contemplated in the darkness for a while, before abruptly shouting out, "Old scoundrel! I can't wait for you to die!"

After shouting it out, she waited for a few seconds... She did not go back to the beginning! This sentence fit the character specification of Zhang Xin Ai! It was something she would say when she was alone!

No wonder. Although Big Brother Hai was rich, he was too old, not as young and attractive as his son, Little Ke. Men were not the only ones who coveted good looks, women were the same. The more attractive and the richer the better. From how Zhang Xin Ai was two-timing the father and son pair, Ning Ning suspected that she had a thought—if Big Brother Hai died, Little Ke would be able to inherit his riches, becoming a rich and handsome man who was firmly tied to her apron strings.

"...If you were dead, Little Ke and I would be out of your clutches." Ning Ning sighed, her eyes gazing at the darkness in front of her.

She knew Little Ke was standing in front of her with a scalpel in hand, holding his breath with a grim expression. Like an executioner on the execution platform, he was ready to swing the blade down

towards her neck anytime.

Buddha would not be able to make him put down the scalpel in his hand, begging for her life would not be able to make him put down the scalpel in his hand, the relationship they had would not be to make him put down the scalpel in his hand... What exactly should she do so as not to end up as a victim to his blade?

"I just want to be together with Little Ke..." She stared at the darkness in front of her.

"Heh." A cold laugh suddenly emerged from the darkness.

Ning Ning remained silent for an instant before probing out, "Little Ke?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you turn on the lights?" Ning Ning asked.

"I'm afraid of looking at your face."

These words sent chills into Ning Ning's bones. She guessed that at the moment she turned on the lights, history would repeat itself, the scalpel in the other party's hand would once again be embedded into her body.

What should she do? Quickly think of something!

Since Zhang Xin Ai could live till the weekend, it meant that she had successfully duped Little Ke. How did she do it?

"If I were Zhang Xin Ai," Ning Ning asked herself, "what would I do?"

She did not like Zhang Xin Ai, her lifestyle and her outlooks were completely different from Ning Ning. But at this moment in time, for survival, to successfully advance the plot, Ning Ning had to abandon her body and mind so as to accept this role.

In the darkness, a woman seemed to be hugging Ning Ning from the back.

"What's so difficult about two timing?" She said softly by Ning Ning's ear, her voice was languid and charming, "What's hard to come by is that these two pairs know each other—a father and son, a pair of brothers, next door neighbours. Tsk tsk, it's so delightful and exciting."

Aren't you afraid of getting found out?

"I'm a cautious person, they won't find out." The woman started laughing with self-confidence. "So what if they found out? As long as I

used the right method, they would forgive me. For example, this little brat in front of you. Think of his age, then think about his relationship with his father..."

As the woman continued to speak, her lips started to curve upwards.

If the room had been lit up, one would be able to see that the person who had their lips curved up (in a smile) was not that woman, but Ning Ning herself.

"What a coincidence, I am also afraid of looking at your face." She said with a laugh, "Let's just talk like this."

Little Ke, "..."

A child was rebellious. With a flick, he turned the lights on. The light illuminated his face, it also illuminated her face, both faces were crying.

Little Ke was startled. He had heard her laugh, but he did not expect her to be crying.

"I told you, don't turn on the lights." Ning Ning brought her hands up to cover her face. She said while laughing, "I don't look good right now."

If Little Ke's action was rebellious like a child, she looked like a mature adult, forever maintaining a smile, not allowing herself to cry.

"..." Little Ke fell silent for a moment before suddenly asking, "What did my father do to you?"

"Nothing." Ning Ning said, her hands remained on her face.

"Nothing—then why did you scold him and cry so hard?"

"Don't ask."

Little Ke's attitude had already mellowed a lot from what it originally was. Seeing that she was avoiding the question, he slowly started to feel exasperated. He gripped the scalpel behind his back tightly as he asked with a grim tone, "Weren't you just cursing for my old man to go to hell? Why are you not telling me anything now? Are you afraid that I will tell him?"

Ning Ning, "Yes."

Little Ke's face turned pale, his eyes showing a murderous intent.

"Little Ke." Ning Ning suddenly put her hands down and smiled at him. "Do you want to kill me?"

Little Ke was shocked by her words.

"It's written on your face." Ning Ning reached out to grab his arm. He was not prepared, the hand behind him was pulled towards her, the scalpel that was in his hand was exposed to her—but she just took a glance before smiling at him, the smile had a sense of indulgence and helplessness. "Look. You are a person who cannot hide your feelings, you would always speak your mind, I...am quite envious of you."

Little Ke looked at her while stopping himself from speaking.

He was a simple and straightforward person, even his plan to murder a person was simple and straightforward. He switched off the light, she would switch on the light, kill—it was just three steps. But Ning Ning had disrupted his plans every step of the way. He had only taken the first step, not being able to take the next two steps at all.

"Take a seat." Ning Ning turned her back towards him and walked towards the fridge, seeming like she was not afraid of him rushing up to her from behind at all. The refrigerator door was opened, cool air greeted her, she asked, "What would you like to drink? Juice? Beer? Tea?"

"...I'm not here for your food and drinks?" Little Ke said.

Ning Ning closed the fridge and returned to the living room with a bunch of beers in her arms. She placed them on the table before opening a can and taking a sip, then she sighed again. "I'll have some if you won't, I heard that a drunk person wouldn't feel pain when they get killed."

Little Ke looked at her with a complicated expression.

The empty beer cans on the table were increasing, her face was turning more and more red. Just as she was about to open the next can, a hand reached out from beside her.

"Enough." Little Ke held her hand, his eyes were filled with anger and heartache.

Ning Ning slowly cast a sideward glance at him. Her face was red, her eyes were also red, her pair of beautiful almond eyes had tears that were on the verge of falling, giving off a pitiful vibe. He gave her hand a forceful tug, her whole body fell meekly towards him like catkins in the wind, fleabanes floating on the water, her head gently leaned on his shoulder.

As she leaned on him, she felt his body froze. After some hesitation,

he still did not back away in the end.

That did it, she thought.

Murder required a spurt of energy. Unless the person was a professional killer or an executioner, it would be very hard to go through with it once the impulse had disappeared.

However, she was not satisfied with just getting out of the current predicament. She had to plan for the days ahead. Thus, she continued to lean on his shoulder and said in a meek and pitiful voice, "You know the kind of person your father is, you also know the kind of person I am. Add his temper on top of that, how can I go against him? He is a tyrant."

Little Ke did not say a word, but he must have thought the same way.

Just by looking at how he had argued with Big Brother Hai, the father and son pair were like fire and water. When they went off at each other they would refer to themselves in a proud way, neither of them would give in to the other. As a father, Big Brother Hai's heart nevertheless had anger; yet, as the son, the anger in Little Ke's heart was estimated to not be small either.

"He is always like this." Sure enough, Little Ke started to give a cold account of his father. "Always relying on his stinky money as if he was the most important person in the world. All I did was to talk back at him a little bit, he threatened to stop providing me food and water, toss me back to the countryside to live with the farm animals."

Ning Ning laughed. "He is your father, he is also the person who is providing for me. The two of us are his golden sparrows—locked in cages, unable to live outside of them, so neither of us could go against him."

The more she said, the worse Little Ke looked. Once she finished speaking, he even started laughing coldly.

Ning Ning did all of that deliberately.

Having a fierce confrontation with his father, liking a woman who was a lot older than him—one who just had to be his father's woman—oedipus complex, also known as mother complex. Did Little Ke have a mother complex? She was not sure, but she was sure of one thing, which was that: There were things that became more commonplace the more forbidden it was, there were things that were more talked about the more forbidden it was—the more forbidden something was, the more charming it became. It made people shudder, yet it also

made people unable to resist them.

At least, from the looks of it, Little Ke had accepted her now, he was no longer angry because she was his father's woman.

"That old fart will eventually die. I've seen his medical examination report, high blood pressure, coronary heart disease...that's right." Little Ke suddenly turned and looked at her without an expression. "Did you get together with my father first, or did you get together with me first?"

This question, one bad answer would probably mean that she would be greeted with the scalpel.

But did she need to answer him? Little Ke asked her a few more questions then gave her a push. That was when she opened her eyes and looked at him. "What did you say?"

Little Ke suspected that she was acting dumb, but her breath smelled like beer and there was actually a table of beer cans. Even if she was acting dumb, what could he do about it? Could he see through her acting skills with his eyes? If he could have done so, he would not have been dancing on her palm.

"Sigh." Little Ke sighed as he cradled her in his arms and brought her to the bedroom.

When he stooped to put her down, the scalpel fell out of his pocket and landed by her hand.

Ning Ning held the handle and raised the scalpel.

Little Ke took two steps back and looked at her with slight suspicion. Was she actually drunk or was she acting dumb?

Ning Ning raised the scalpel in front of her, looking at it blankly for a long while before turning her head and reaching out towards Little Ke. "Give."

Little Ke breathed a sigh of relief. It looked like she was actually drunk.

He took the scalpel out of her hands. Before he could put it back into his pocket, he heard Ning Ning say, "Quickly kill me."

Little Ke was startled. "Why would I kill you?"

"I'm giving you my life." Ning Ning chuckled, her smile was charming. "I'll live if you want me to live, I'll die if you want me to die... Remember to take the scalpel with you, don't let people find out that you were here. Tell your father what happened when you get

back, get him to help you deal with the repercussions."

Little Ke was even more confused after hearing what she had said. He did not know whether she was sober or drunk, smart or stupid?

"I'm so envious of you." Ning Ning turned her head away and laid flat on the bed. The charming smile remained on her face, but tears were rolling down the corner of her eyes. "You can say anything, you can love anyone... I cannot say anything, nor can I love anyone."

She stopped speaking, as if she was sound asleep. She looked like a lamb on an altar, waiting to be dealt with by him.

Why didn't she beg? Why didn't she retaliate? One stab would end her, why weren't you doing it? Little Ke held onto the scalpel tightly, he used so much force that his hand started trembling.

"I cannot say anything, nor can I love anyone."

Indeed, how could she speak or love freely? She was from a very poor family. Her four family members were all relying on her to be the sole breadwinner. She was a pure female star on stage, she wasn't allowed to be in a relationship off stage so as to preserve her image. For the sake of getting investments, she even had to go to dinners frequently—the people at dinner were all like his father who had nothing else but their stinky money.

"You know the kind of person your father is...how can I go against him?"

Who was he to reprimand her? Because he himself could not go against his father either. The difference was, besides the mountain that was his father, no one else could try to climb above his head. But it was different for her, there were too many people she could not go against.

"I'm giving you my life."

Nothing belonged to her. Her clothes, jewelry, apartment, including her love—only her life belonged to her, and it was now in his hands...

The lamb on the altar had finally arrived at its final ending.

What fell upon it was not a blade, but a kiss.

The executioner had given up on the blade in his hands, hugging the lamb tightly.

Their lips parted, he then slowly got up and caressed Ning Ning's cheek. He said softly, "I will think of something, I will definitely think of something..."

The moment his footsteps went away, the moment the sound of the closing door rang out was when Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief and opened her eyes.

Her back was drenched (in sweat)!

"The first and the second were both the same." Ning Ning placed a hand on her forehead and laughed bitterly. "Then the third and fourth would probably not be too different... You're killing me."

Why did Zhang Xin Ai plan to break up with them? Was it because she had felt their murderous intent? The reason she picked the fourth person, was it because he was truly in love with her? Or was it because the fourth person had enough power to protect her and help her avoid death?

Ning Ning indulged in flights of fancy for a long moment, only falling asleep at two in the morning. It was almost noon when she woke up the next day. Her phone had a few missed calls. She might have slept too deeply the day before, she didn't even hear any of those calls. She got up and brushed her teeth as she returned the calls.

"Hello." She said, "Little Ke...I got drunk yesterday, did I say anything weird?"

"No." Little Ke's voice was cold and bland. "Since you are up, let me ask you something."

What was it? He was fine when he left yesterday, why did he suddenly sound cold and bland? Did something happen again? Ning Ning concentrated and carefully asked, "What is it?"

"Whom did you give your house keys to?" Little Ke asked.

Ning Ning thought about it. Based on Zhang Xin Ai's cautiousness, she could not have given her house keys to anyone. Now that she thought about it, the fact that her keys would be with Little Ke was a little strange. This fellow was young and rash, he had no filter on his mouth, he was even a medical student who dared to bring a sword to see the emperor. The person who was most unsuitable to give her keys to was him—what was the difference between that and giving up her life?

"I didn't give them to anyone." Ning Ning answered, "Speaking of this, the keys around your neck..."

She didn't complete her sentence and let it end equivocally. It could be interpreted as—the key around your neck was the only one I had given out, it could also be interpreted as—where did the key around

your neck come from?

"..." Little Ke remained silent for a moment before saying, "When I went to your house, the key was on the door. I thought that you were at home, I went in and forgot to remove the keys from the door."

"...Then?" Ning Ning asked?

"Then I went in to look for you." Little Ke said.

Heh heh, what do you mean "went in to look for you"? It was clearly "went in to take your worthless life".

"I did not find you after a while and I heard the sound of someone coming up the stairs...I knew that it was you from the sound of the footsteps." Little Ke said, "I returned to the doorway and turned off the light to wait for you."

Ning Ning, "..."

"Hello? Hello? Are you still there?" Little Ke asked.

"...I'm listening." Ning Ning stared at herself in the mirror. "You're not playing with me, right? The key was really at the door before you were here?"

"Of course, why would I lie to you?!" Little Ke asked hesitantly after shouting, "Little Ai, say....who do you think left the keys on the door? Do you think...someone went into your house?"

Ning Ning looked at her reflection in the mirror.

She was half asleep when she got out of bed, she had only been concentrating on brushing her teeth when she entered the bathroom, it was only when she was on the phone that she looked up at the mirror. She brought her long hair behind the shoulders and revealed a snowy white neck, on it was a butterfly-shaped bruise—butterfly-shaped as in the shape of a pair of hands holding onto her neck, the mark left behind from trying to strangle her to death.

She did not even wake up after being strangled like this?

She did not wake up even after so many missed calls?

Ning Ning's whole body trembled. She did not know if she would see needle marks if she were to roll up her sleeves. Maybe someone had given her a dose of anesthesia and she had truly become a lamb to be slaughtered on the altar.

"Hello? Hello? Hello?" Little Ke's voice turned a little frantic. "Little Ai, are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Ning Ning continued to brush her teeth as she talked on the phone, bubbles formed on her teeth as she brushed them with the toothbrush. She laughed with a lisp. "I think you're overthinking it. If there really were a bad guy in here, I probably would have already been robbed and raped."

Someone had definitely come last night!

Ning Ning suspected that the person was one of the three lovers that Zhang Xin Ai had wanted to get rid of!

If not, how would one explain the person letting her go after attempting to kill her?

"But I won't stop you if you insist on coming over." Ning Ning said with a laugh, she was actually hinting to him to quickly come over. *Quickly come over! Someone came last night, he is probably still here!*

But Little Ke did not manage to read between the lines, he breathed a sigh of relief instead. "Glad to hear that you're fine. I'm currently negotiating with my father, but if you really want me to go over, I will."

"...It's fine." Ning Ning laughed, her eyes were fixed on the mirror in front of her. A tall man was standing behind her. He opened up both his hands like a butterfly behind her neck, then he slowly held her slender neck. She swallowed, her voice was dry. "You should attend to your matters, we can just meet next time."

She hung up and at the same time fell backwards into the arms of the man.

"...I knew you wouldn't be able to bear killing me." She looked back and gave him an indescribable cunning and enchanting smile.

Pei Xuan looked down at her and smiled.

1Want Want Shelly Senbei is a popular rice cracker snack in Asia. Image included below.

Chapter 114

114: Boss's Lover

On the table in the living room was lunch for three people.

This was a matter of course, because there were three people sitting in the living room.

Ning Ning, Pei Xuan, and a man with a crew cut.

Ning Ning had originally thought that Pei Xuan was the one who had assaulted her in the middle of the night, but she realised she had wronged him when she saw the crew-cut man. Crew-Cut Man looked at her as if she had killed his father, biting off a chunk of a chicken drumstick and asking as he chewed, "When will you let me kill her?"

Ning Ning felt a sense of urgency.

"Stop scaring her with such jokes." Pei Xuan placed a straw into a glass of soy milk and placed it in front of Ning Ning. "Little Ai, let me ask you something."

"What is it?"

"Of the money I previously left with you, how much have you spent?"

"..."

At this moment, Ning Ning wished that she could beat Zhang Xin Ai to death with a punch. *Sister, could you keep your wits about you? The world is such a big place, there are so many people about. Out of all the people to mess with, why must you mess with Pei Xuan?*

"You don't have to ask." The crew-cut man let out a cold laugh. "I saw her (bank) passbook, her passbook had no more money in it."

...Messing with Pei Xuan was one thing, why must you spend his money? You even spent it all!!

This amount of money definitely did not only belong to Pei Xuan alone, he had a share, Crew-Cut Man had a share too. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain why Crew-Cut Man was looking at her with such an expression—seizing one's fortune was like killing one's parents.

"A star has huge expenses, I can understand if you spent a little of it." Pei Xuan smiled at Ning Ning. "But you can't just spend five million on your own."

Five million!!

"...Give me some time." Ning Ning said, "I have a lot of jewellery pieces here, I'll exchange them for money for you."

"One day." Pei Xuan set a time for her. "We are leaving tomorrow. I don't care if you were going to sell your jewellery or borrow money today—Give us two million, or else..."

The crew-cut man in front of her laughed coldly. He placed both his hands on his own neck and made a strangulation gesture towards Ning Ning.

"...I'll try my best." Ning Ning said.

Selling every piece of jewellery within a day would be something that was very difficult to do, so Ning Ning for the most part called people up to ask them to lend her money. Borrowing money was something that was difficult for anyone—anyone who wasn't Zhang Xin Ai. This woman's interpersonal relationship with others was strangely good. The moment they heard that she was in trouble, people lent her at least ten to twenty thousand. Those who were willing to lend more had given her one hundred to five hundred thousand. She actually really gathered up two million in a day, she even had excess.

This money was not to be saved in her bank account, but in Pei Xuan's designated bank account. He was wearing sunglasses and a face mask when he went downstairs. Once he had confirmed the money was in the account, he returned upstairs. He pulled down his face mask and smiled at Ning Ning. "You've worked hard."

"It was nothing, it was nothing."

"Our train is at two. There's still time, we'll stay here for a while."

"Alright. Take a seat, do you want some beer?"

"I'm good. That's right, how do I use the tub in your bathroom?"

In the bathroom was a hot tub. Ning Ning knelt by the side of the tub as she helped him fill it up, water started to bubble out in the tub. She put a hand in and gently swirled the water, testing the temperature. The water was slowly filling the tub up, she was about to call Pei Xuan over when a hand suddenly reached out from behind her and pushed the back of her head down, her entire person was pressed

into the water in front of her.

Bubbles formed as she gurgled and used every ounce of her strength to struggle.

"The money is already in our hands, why go through the trouble to kill her?" Pei Xuan's voice sounded as if they fluttered in through the doorway.

"Pei Ge, this woman made you a cuckold, she even made off with so much of our money. Even if you are okay with her, I am not." Crew-Cut Man's voice rang out coldly behind Ning Ning.

"...Let go."

The hand that was pressing Ning Ning's head down suddenly let go. She struggled to get out of the tub quickly, holding herself up by the tub with both her hands as she was gasping for air.

"Let the water out and bring the tape. Secure her in the tub, knock her out before you fill up the tub again." Pei Xuan said lazily behind her, "Make it clean if you want to kill her. Don't cause trouble for me."

"...You unruly citizens want to bring harm to the sovereign, We will not die hahahaha!!!"

Collapse of character designation.

Back to the beginning.

The crew-cut man in front of her bit off a chunk of a chicken drumstick. "When will you let me kill her?"

"Stop scaring her with such jokes." Pei Xuan placed a straw into a glass of soy milk and placed it in front of Ning Ning. "Little Ai, let me ask you something."

"I don't have money."

"..."

She would die even if she gave them the money anyway, she might as well not give them any.

Ten minutes later.

"Mmph mmph mmph!!! Mmph mmph mmph!!!" The crew-cut man placed Ning Ning into the hot tub. Both her hands and legs were taped up, her mouth was also taped up with scotch tape, she was frantically shaking her head at Pei Xuan.

"Whether money or your life is more important, have you thought

about it carefully?" Pei Xuan leaned on the wall with folded arms. He shot a look at Crew-Cut Man, which the latter responded to by forcefully tearing off the scotch tape on Ning Ning's mouth.

He used so much force that after he had torn the tape off, Ning Ning's face stung like it was on fire.

She looked at Pei Xuan while catching her breath. Water continued to fill the tub, it was already over her waist, her long wavy hair floated above the water like black seaweed. She swallowed and asked, "You'll let me go if I give you the money?"

"Of course." Pei Xuan smiled lazily. "Killing you does me no good."

Ning Ning turned and looked at Crew-Cut Man, saying coldly, "What about him? Can you guarantee that he wouldn't kill me?"

Pei Xuan glanced at Crew-Cut Man with what seemed to be a smile. "I can."

He was a damn liar, she should not have believed him.

Ning Ning repeated what she did before, borrowing two million from her friends and relatives. Crew-cut man also repeated what he did before, he once again pushed her head into the water.

"We had a deal!" Ning Ning fought to get her head out of the water, shouting in a fearful but furious tone, "You guaranteed that he wouldn't kill me!"

"My apologies." Pei Xuan played it down. "I was joking with you."

"...You unruly citizens want to bring the sovereign harm, We will not die hahahaha!!"

Collapse of character designation.

Back to the beginning.

The crew-cut man in front of her bit off a chunk of a chicken drumstick. "When will you let me kill her?"

"Stop scaring her with such jokes." Pei Xuan placed a straw into a glass of soy milk and placed it in front of Ning Ning. "Little Ai, let me ask you something."

Ning Ning did not say a word as she stared at the two people in front of her.

From the start, they had never planned to let her live.

Especially Crew-Cut Man, he was simply dead set on wanting her

life. Why? For the five million? To show his loyalty to Pei Xuan, or was it for...

"It's about the five million, right?" Ning Ning laughed, "Don't worry, you'll get your money."

Pei Xuan exchanged a glance with Crew-Cut Man then smiled. "That's good. When will you be able to give me the money?"

"I have a collection of jewellery in my room, but I will need some time to handle the situation." Ning Ning took out her phone. "How about this, let me make a few calls and ask around to see if any friends are willing to lend me some money?"

Upon finishing, she made a few calls in front of Pei Xuan.

Previously, for the sake of borrowing money, she mainly called men. This time, she mainly called women.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I recently bought a house, I don't have spare cash on hand."

"My two kids are in school, their expenses are huge...can I lend you a thousand?"

"I'm in a meeting, I'll call you back later."

Just as she was about to call the next person, Pei Xuan suddenly reached out and held her hand.

"Why are you calling only women?" He stared at her, his lips curled ever so slightly upward. "A woman as pretty and as good at handling people as you would probably not be popular among other women. Let me pick for you."

He had seen through her. Ning Ning could only watch as he took the phone out of her hands. She did not know if he went through her call logs or her contact list, he returned the phone to her afterward. "Big Brother Hai, Little Ke, Li Shan Zhu, give these three a call first."

The results were obvious.

Big Brother Hai, "You still dare to call your Big Brother Hai?? Your Big Brother Hai is still busy teaching that little whelp at home a lesson, I don't have time for you!!"

Little Ke, "I need to settle the matter with my father, I will get back to you later."

Li Shan Zhu, "Big Sister Ai, give me a moment... I have a total of three thousand inside my card. I'll leave three hundred on me for my

meals and I'll transfer the rest to you, will that do?"

Mistakes made people...no, people made mistakes. Ning Ning looked at Pei Xuan innocently after she hung up. You had to pick the three of them out of everyone, God does exist, you deserved to have your face twisted up.

Pei Xuan furrowed his brows as he thought about it, then shook his head and let out a bitter laugh. "I didn't expect you to be doing so poorly once you stopped involving yourself with the movie tickets."

Ning Ning's heart stopped. What did he mean by that?

"There are people who use the movie tickets to save people, there are people who use the movie tickets to mold their acting skills.." Pei Xuan placed a cigarette in his mouth, the crew-cut man helped him light it up from the side. He blew a puff of smoke into the sky, then narrowed his eyes and smiled at Ning Ning behind the diffusing smoke. "You took the tickets to improve your interpersonal relationships. Yet, even after doing that for so many times, you couldn't even borrow two million, that's such a waste of that many tickets."

So that was it.

Ning Ning closed her eyes.

No wonder Zhang Xin Ai was so fearless, it was also no wonder she had good relationships with others—because she had movie tickets. As long as she could find the corresponding movie, as long as she had enough movie tickets, she could go back repeatedly to improve or even turn around her relationship with anyone.

But this kind of improvement had its limits as well. Had she changed the fate of a main character? How many times? Since she had the ability to change the past, why did she not try to change the fate of her fiancé? Was it because she didn't love him, or was it because she had run out of tickets?

Now was not the time to be thinking of those things.

"Take out all of your jewellery pieces, we will handle it later." Pei Xuan asked with a smile as he held his cigarette between his fingers, "That's right, how do I use the tub in your bathroom? "

Splish, splosh, splish, splosh, splish, splosh. Water was bubbling up within the tub.

Ning Ning stood by the bathtub, a figure silently approaching behind her.

She suddenly turned around and hugged him. She told him in a low voice, "You really think I would spend the whole five million?"

The other party was shocked. While he was still immersed in his shock, she had already abruptly stood on her tiptoes, hugging his neck with both her arms and kissing him ferociously.

Crew-Cut Man did not know how to respond at first, then he slowly hugged her waist. At last, he decided he might as well let down his guard, forget about everything else, and kiss her.

Was that very strange?

No, it was not strange at all.

After finding out that she was multi-timing him, Pei Xuan was not angry in the slightest, the one who was angry was Crew-Cut Man. Why? Because the person who loved her was him, not Pei Xuan.

Because she was the boss' woman, he suppressed his feelings, but would Zhang Xin Ai allow him to suppress his feelings? She wouldn't. This woman loved to play around with forbidden love—between father and son, between brothers—how would she let this pair of master and servant go? The only thing worse than this kiss that was akin to cheating, was that it was not happening for the first time.

Their lips parted, Ning Ning slowly placed her chin on his shoulder. She turned her eyes to look at him—her eyes that were flowing with Zhang Xin Ai's seduction and malice. She said to him with tender affection, "The money belongs to the two of us, why should he get a share?"

Chapter 115

115: Thousand Miles Away from Her

The sound of footsteps could be heard outside, Crew-Cut Man frantically let go and maintained a distance from Ning Ning.

"Has the tub been filled?" Pei Xuan stood at the doorway.

"It has been filled." Ning Ning said to him with an unperturbed expression, as if she was unfamiliar with his lackey whom she had just seduced.

Pei Xuan walked past her as he took off his top. He was not fat even though he was past his middle age, maybe it was because he had led a healthy lifestyle in prison? He even had a few abs.

He tossed his top at the sink before turning around and smiling at Ning Ning. "What's the matter? You want to watch me take a bath?"

Ning Ning retreated out of the bathroom frantically, Crew-Cut Man followed closely behind.

The door to the bathroom was closed from inside. The two of them held their breaths as they listened, the sound of water slowly reverberated from inside.

"Kill him." Ning Ning said in a low voice to Crew-Cut Man.

Crew-Cut Man was frightened by her words, he frantically shook his head. "No, no, no, that won't do, he's my boss..."

"Do you think he will let you off knowing that the two of us have a thing?" Ning Ning laughed coldly.

"He doesn't know." Crew-Cut Man's expression twinkled for a moment.

Ning Ning smiled. She slowly raised her hand and caressed his lips, then held up the finger she used to caress his lips in front of his eyes—it was stained a little red with lipstick.

Crew-Cut Man was appalled. He frantically touched his lips with both his hands...lipstick, it was even a flamboyant bright red.

"...You!" Crew-Cut Man looked at her in shock and anger. "You planned this?"

"Dear, upon seeing this, what do you think he will think of?" Ning Ning dabbed on her red lips and smiled at him in a wretched manner. "He will not do anything to you now as you are of use to him, but what would happen after you are of no use to him any longer? How do you think he will deal with a fellow like you who made him a cuckold?"

Crew-Cut Man fell silent. He clenched his fist and breathed heavily.

"Of course, you don't necessarily have to kill him." Ning Ning relaxed her tone, she didn't really want to kill Pei Xuan, it would be better to send him back to prison. The reason she had mentioned killing him at the beginning was for the bargaining session that was about to follow. She touched her still bruised neck and asked, "I did not wake up even after you had strangled me, how did you do it?"

"...I have an anesthetic shot with me." Crew-Cut Man answered.

Ning Ning looked towards the bathroom. "Then what are you waiting for?"

Crew-Cut Man was in two minds, he was visibly struggling. One would not be able to tell that he was so timid. He was clearly taller and stronger than Pei Xuan, but right now he looked like a little deer that was being forced to kill a leopard, the little deer was terrified.

She couldn't give him time to think. The more a person thought, the more timid they became.

"Dear, don't you want me?" Ning Ning placed a hand on his chest, her fingers moving downwards as her vision moving upwards, her voice was coquettish and bewitching, "Don't you want to live in a luxurious house, drive a luxurious car and be a rich man? Pei Xuan can give you nothing but those. Whatever he can give you, I can give you, what he can't give you..."

She brought her sexy red lips close to him and blew hot air at his ear, her words like melted honey. "I can give it to you."

Before wealth and lust, Crew-Cut Man had finally lost his reasoning.

He held onto the anesthetic shot in his pocket tightly and walked towards the bathroom. He stopped in his tracks halfway to the bathroom and turned around to look at Ning Ning, as if he wanted to see if she was still standing there.

Of course Ning Ning was still standing there. She waved at him, then gently placed two fingers on her lips and blew him a kiss.

This kiss gave Crew-Cut Man courage. He took a deep breath before finally pushing the door in front of him open and walked into the bathroom.

This situation was the exact opposite of what it was before.

Ning Ning and Pei Xuan had swapped roles.

Ning Ning had to rack her brains to escape from Crew-Cut Man last time, now it was Pei Xuan's turn. How would he try to escape?

"Ah!!"

The scream didn't belong to Pei Xuan, it belonged to Crew-Cut Man.

Not only was there a puddle of water on the floor in front of the door, there was also a bar of soap which had almost dissolved in the water, there were bubbles on the water surface. Crew-Cut Man was in too much of a hurry that he ended up stepping on the soap as he rushed in the door, then slipped and fell backwards with feet facing up.

Pei Xuan laughed as he watched.

He was not taking a bath, even the top that he had just taken off was neatly worn on his body. He had been leaning on the wall, waiting for Crew-Cut Man to enter.

Pei Xuan quickly walked towards him as Crew-Cut Man fell over, bent down and picked up the anesthetic shot that had fallen onto the floor, then jabbed it viciously at Crew-Cut Man's neck.

Crew-Cut Man only had enough time to block it with his arm. The needle did not pierce into his neck, it only pierced into his arm, but what difference did it make? Crew-Cut Man struggled for a while. He got off the ground before he fell limply back down, half his face was stuck on the cold porcelain tile. He said dizzily, "It was her, not me, it was her, not me..."

Pei Xuan ignored him and stepped over his body.

He scanned the surroundings. The living room was empty, there was not a single soul.

He then took a few more steps towards the front door and saw that it was open, a pair of women's shoes were missing by the door.

"Hehe." Pei Xuan stared in the direction of the front door. He narrowed his eyes and smiled, "She really is a fox."

On the streets.

"Huff...huff..." Ning Ning ran wildly on the streets. Unexpectedly, she saw a taxi driving towards her, she frantically flagged it down as she stood in front of it.

The driver slammed on the brakes, he wound down the window and peeked his head out. "Do you want to die?!"

Ning Ning did not answer him. She immediately pulled open the door and got on the taxi, then pulled her messy hair behind her and told the driver, "Quick, start driving quickly."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere! Mister, quickly start driving!"

She took out her phone once the taxi drove off, thinking about who to call.

Police?

No, Zhang Xin Ai wouldn't do that.

Because she was in cahoots with Pei Xuan—or at least had been in cahoots—Ning Ning didn't know what exactly Zhang Xin Ai did for Pei Xuan, but she definitely had a degree of trust from Pei Xuan. Otherwise, he would not have transferred his money to her before he went to prison.

The money was nowhere to be found now, it was very likely that while Pei Xuan was in prison, Zhang Xin Ai had squandered it extravagantly, or maybe she had transferred it. If Pei Xuan were to be arrested by the police, he would definitely have snitched on her.

A female star who helped a bad guy to launder money? Zhang Xin Ai definitely would not have wanted to be saddled with such a bad reputation. Thus, she wouldn't have called the police, and Ning Ning also could not call the police. Otherwise, she would immediately cause the character specification to collapse and return to the beginning.

She deleted the 110 that she had just entered (into her phone). Ning Ning opened the call logs to look for people she could ask for help from.

"Big Brother Hai..., Little Ke... No, no, these people won't do." Ning Ning muttered, "If they were to come up against Pei Xuan, they might not only not help me deal with him, they might even help him deal with me..."

Just like how she convinced Crew-Cut Man just now.

Pei Xuan could also convince Big Brother Hai and Little Ke.

It was not a competition of who was right, it was about who had more eloquence, smarts and cunning...

Ning Ning could not guarantee that she would win against Pei Xuan alone, nor could she place her stakes on people like Big Brother Hai or Little Ke. How many times had she died in their hands now?

Her finger continued to scroll... Hold on—Ning Ning hastily scrolled backwards.

"Wen Yu..." She softly read out the name in her phone.

When she got back to her senses, the call was already made.

The phone rang a few times before a young man's voice could be heard from the phone, "Hello, who's this?"

"It's me," Ning Ning paused, "Zhang Xin Ai."

With a clack, the call was disconnected.

...What was with this situation? Ning Ning was astounded. After transmigrating as Zhang Xin Ai for so many days, this was the first man to hang up on her, everyone else other than him had waited for her to hang up first.

Suspecting that his phone had issues, Ning Ning called him back again, but in the end, her calls would not connect again. Why? The driver in front of her teased her as he drove. "Are you collecting a debt?"

"..." Ning Ning stewed on it for a moment. "Why do you think I'm collecting a debt?"

"Your calls couldn't even get through once, what else would it be if the person is not avoiding a creditor?" The driver tossed his phone to her. "Here, give it another shot."

Ning Ning picked up the phone, this time, she deliberated on her words before calling again.

"Wen Yu, help me." She switched to an extremely pitiful tone, even a hard rock would not be able to hold back its tears if it had heard her. "I'm in big trouble..."

"Get someone else to help you." Wen Yu said blandly.

With another clack, this phone could not get through to him anymore as well.

Ning Ning stared speechlessly at the phone for a very long time.

...What was going on? Was the person on the other end really Wen Yu? Was this the Wen Yu she knew? When did the little angel in her mind turn so ice cold to push someone a thousand miles away?

Forget it. If the calls couldn't get through, she would send him a text.

She opened her messages and was astonished.

This was not the future, WeChat didn't exist, there was only SMS. If a mobile phone had too many text messages, then it would not receive new ones. Thus, Zhang Xin Ai had been deleting everyone's messages—except for Wen Yu's...

Although he had distanced himself a thousand miles away from her, but the messages he had sent, she had kept every single one of them.

"...How could this be?" Ning Ning muttered in her heart, "The person Zhang Xin Ai wants to be together with, is it you?"

In that instant, Ning Ning felt that the phone in her palm weighed a thousand pounds.

No matter if it was Big Brother Hai, Little Ke or the gold-chain wearing Crew-Cut Man, she was willing to gnaw and con them because she had to do so, she wanted to leave this movie alive. But...but what if the person was Wen Yu?

Ning Ning trembled as she typed her message, she even started to perspire from her forehead. It wasn't even this difficult when she had to go up against Pei Xuan. In her heart was a voice that was telling her repeatedly, "You know you are acting, but what if he can't tell? You have already kissed quite a few people with your mouth now, but what if he doesn't know? You...you profess your love for him as Zhang Xin Ai, what if he accepts?"

After thinking about these scary outcomes, the hand which Ning Ning used to type the message froze.

She hesitated for a while more before she sighed. "Forget it."

Just as she was about to delete the message, a young couple ran out across in front of the taxi, forcing the driver to slam on the brakes. Ning Ning was caught off guard and fell forward. While she was not paying attention to her hand, the message was sent.

The content was only one sentence.

"A person named Pei Xuan is looking for trouble with me."

When Ning Ning leaned back on the seat again, her phone rang.

"Where are you now?" Wen Yu's voice rang out from the other end.

Chapter 116

116: Getting Him

"I'm near the department store at Parade Street." Ning Ning glanced out of the window.

"Wait for me there," Wen Yu said, "fifteen minutes."

After she hung up, Ning Ning made full use of the fifteen minutes to look through the messages in the phone so as to get a clear idea of the relationship between Zhang Xin Ai and him.

The corner of her mouth twitched.

The two of them knew each other.

Wen Yu's psychology teacher was Zhang Xin Ai's psychologist.

It was just...

[There is really nothing between me and Doctor Zhou.]

[Trust me!]

[I'm just sick! I can't control myself!]

What did she mean? Could it be that having loose morals was a kind of mental illness?

Ning Ning looked at Wen Yu's replies next.

[Doctor Zhou is a teacher I'm greatly indebted to. Besides, he has a wife and child, please restrain yourself.]

He did not reply to the second message.

[You are not sick, this is also not an illness, this is but your personal hobby and a type of habit in your life.]

As calm as a scalpel, he peeled off the seductive skin and revealed the ugly bones on the inside. Not only did Wen Yu see through Zhang Xin Ai's nature, he also maintained a level head and figured out what she was doing behind his back.

She was seducing Wen Yu and his teacher Doctor Zhou at the same time.

Old habits die hard, Zhang Xin Ai had wanted to experience the

joys of two-timing a teacher and his student.

Although Doctor Zhou was a man with a family, but he was unable to resist the temptation of the femme fatale in front of him. This seemingly mature and earnest man did something that shocked everyone including Zhang Xin Ai at the end—he abandoned his wife and child to propose to Zhang Xin Ai.

How could Zhang Xin Ai agree to it? She told him with an innocent face, "You are a person with a wife and child, how could I have fallen in love with you? Ah, you're saying that this was not what I said before? I was sick...when I'm sick, I cannot control my mouth. If I had ever said anything along the lines of liking you, you must not take it seriously...hehe."

In the end, the only person with an egg on his face was Doctor Zhou. He had made a big joke of himself, he had even gotten divorced with his wife. His wife and child hated him to death now, he could not even disclose her "sickness" to the public due to the non-disclosure agreement. He disappeared in the middle of a certain night, no one knew where he went, no one ever saw him again.

The car door beside her was suddenly flung open.

Wen Yu got in the car. He placed his briefcase in between the two of them, as if to draw a line in the sand.

Ning Ning looked at his side profile. A twenty-four-year-old Wen Yu, the naivety of a child could barely be seen on him anymore, the scholarly aura from his teenage years had been sharpened like an unsheathed sword... Ning Ning felt that she did not know him well anymore because she could not feel any warmth from him. He was like a marble sculpture placed high up inside the church, overlooking the ugliness of humankind.

What changed him?

"...Long time no see." She greeted him with difficulty.

"There is no need to reminiscence about the past." Wen Yu asked blandly, "Where is Pei Xuan?"

The taxi brought them to the foot of the apartment building. The two of them had gone upstairs and seen that the door was open, they carefully walked in. There was no one behind the door, no one in the living room... Wait, the sound of water was coming out of the bathroom.

Ning Ning held her breath and followed behind Wen Yu as he

slowly walked towards the bathroom.

Water was slowly seeping out of the door crack, making the mahogany floor wet. They carefully pushed open the door to the bathroom. A dense white steam greeted them. The white porcelain floor was completely soaked in water, the floor drain was spitting water out crazily, but the water would not stop.

Where was the water coming from?

Ning Ning slowly turned her head and looked over. She saw that the bathtub was overflowing with water continuously, Crew-Cut Man's corpse was floating up and down the water surface, causing water to flow out of the bathtub as he undulated, pouring out onto the floor.

She could not help but scream while covering her mouth with both her hands.

Wen Yu took a step forward and took a look at Crew-Cut Man's corpse. He looked back and asked her, "Who is he?"

"...Pei Xuan's lackey." Ning Ning looked away, she did not want to look at the corpse. "I escaped while the two of them were fighting, I didn't think he would actually...did Pei Xuan kill him?"

Wen Yu stared at her without saying a word.

The atmosphere between the two of them was very weird. Within the silent bathroom, only the water that held the corpse was still flowing and making splashing sounds.

"...Let's call the police." Wen Yu took out his phone, but did not immediately make the call, he shot her a strange look instead. "Is that okay?"

What was not okay about that? Ning Ning urged, "What are you waiting for? Quickly..."

The next second, the car door was opened, Wen Yu got in the car. He placed his briefcase in between the two of them, then looked up and saw that Ning Ning looked at him with a shocked expression. He said, "There is no need to reminiscence about the past." Wen Yu asked blandly, "Where is Pei Xuan?"

As the taxi drove towards the apartment, Ning Ning thought about it. Why? What did she do? She didn't do anything. What did she say? She had only said seven words. She had not finished her sentence, why did she suddenly go back to the beginning?

Back at the apartment building again, back upstairs again,

discovering the corpse in the bathtub again, falling into silence again.

Looking at his strange expression, Ning Ning suddenly understood a very serious problem.

"You..." Ning Ning forced a smile. "You don't think that I killed him right?"

Wen Yu's eyes brightened for a moment.

...You really think so!!

Hold on. Upon more deliberation, there really was such a possibility.

The person who had said Pei Xuan was looking for trouble was her, the person who had said Crew-Cut Man was his lackey was also her. In the end, Pei Xuan was nowhere in sight, while Crew-Cut Man was lying dead in her bathtub.

If that was the case, there was a possibility that she had knocked Crew-Cut Man out and placed him in her bathtub, then left once she turned on the tap. She then met up with Wen Yu so that she would have an alibi. The two of them returned to discover the crime scene together, then she framed Pei Xuan who was nowhere to be seen.

That was why Wen Yu had wanted to call the police.

What about Zhang Xin Ai? Zhang Xin Ai would definitely not want the police to come. Crew-Cut Man's life or death were none of her business, she did not care whether Pei Xuan got caught either; what she cared about now was herself. Not only did she not want the police to find out that she had been secretly helping Pei Xuan to launder money, she also did not want tabloid reporters to find out that a man with a crew cut had died in her house not long after he was released from prison.

She would not want to call the police, she would only want to gag Wen Yu's mouth.

"Damn Pei Xuan! You actually want me to clean up for you after you killed someone!" Ning Ning roared angrily in her heart, then racked her brains and told Wen Yu, "I'm not lying, Pei Xuan was really here."

Wen Yu stared at her closely, seemingly trying to perceive if she was lying.

"I'll just tell you the truth." Ning Ning took a deep breath and looked at him sincerely. "Before Pei Xuan went into prison, he left five

million with me. I did not expect that he would be released early from prison, so I spent the money..."

The next second, the car door was opened. Wen Yu got into the car, then placed his briefcase in between the two of them...

All right, since Zhang Xin Ai did not allow her to tell him the truth, then she would lie to him.

"...You know about my illness." Ning Ning had no choice but to use Zhang Xin Ai's excuse from years ago, showing her hands, her face was full of helplessness, "Father and son, brothers, teacher and student, when I see these types of men I would not be able to control myself. Pei Xuan and the guy in the bathtub...they were superior and subordinate, so I..."

The next second, the car door was opened. Wen Yu got in the car, he placed his briefcase in between the two of them...

The lie didn't work either! What else could she say?

Over and over; failure, upon failure, upon another failure.

Moreover, Ning Ning did not know if she was imagining things, but the time she had before returning to the beginning was getting shorter and shorter. At first, she could finish everything she had to say in the bathroom. Later on, it became a sentence. Even later on, she would return to the beginning the moment she opened her mouth. What was going on? Was there a punishment for failing too many times?

"...Let's call the police." Wen Yu took out his phone, but did not immediately make the call, he shot her a strange look instead. "What's the matter? Are you feeling unwell?"

Ning Ning's face was as white as a sheet, she was rooted on the ground without saying a word.

She could not say anything.

She had failed this scenario too many times, so much so that as of now, as long as she were to utter a word, she would return back to the beginning.

But how could she move the plot forward without speaking?

Ning Ning bit her fingernails. Since Wen Yu was already standing here, having witnessed everything in the bathroom, he would definitely call the police. No one could stop him, especially not Zhang Xin Ai whom he had viewed as the suspect.

Since they did not see eye to eye regarding the matter of the police,

then she could only seek a compromise through other means...but what specifically could it be? Quickly think of it, quickly think of it!

As she was too anxious, not only did Ning Ning start to bite her nails, she even started to pace in place. She had forgotten her whereabouts. There was so much water on the floor, the porcelain tiles were so slippery that she fell before she could take two steps. She screamed and hugged Wen Yu reflexively, Wen Yu also held her up reflexively.

"How could you be so careless?" Wen Yu furrowed his brows as he helped her up.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." Ning Ning said before feeling surprised. She had already said so many words, why had she not returned to the beginning?

The bathroom turned quiet. The atmosphere between the two of them had turned strange again. The reason for the atmosphere this time was different...Ning Ning's clothes were wet.

She was not wearing a lot to begin with. Her clothes were thin, although she did not fall into the water when she slipped previously, the water that was splashed around had splattered onto her, the already thin clothes had gotten wet, making them look transparent. From a bystander's point of view, she seemed to be hugging Wen Yu while she was naked.

"...Let's go out for now." Wen Yu let go of her as he looked in another direction.

The two of them walked out of the bathroom. Ning Ning sat down on the sofa. Wen Yu stopped himself from speaking a few times, but at last he could not hold it in anymore. He held his fist up to his mouth and coughed. "You're drenched, go change?"

Ning Ning looked at him with a complicated expression.

In reality, the main character ticket was very strict. Twice she had walked out of her house wearing the wrong clothes, the main character ticket ended up returning her back to the beginning. The fact that she was sitting there fine and dandy proved that she was wearing the correct set of clothes, it proved that Zhang Xin Ai was more than happy to face him with her current getup.

That came from her desire to seduce...

Damn it! Damn it! Damn it! Ning Ning covered her face with her hands, her voice was a little husky, it trembled a little, "The moment I

closed my eyes, I would see the corpse in the bathroom... I don't dare to be alone, can you accompany me to the bedroom to take my clothes?"

Wen Yu hesitated for a moment. "I'll see you to the door."

Ning Ning laughed bitterly. She had not returned to the beginning after saying that much.

Damn it, she knew what Zhang Xin Ai had wanted to do now.

"Seduce him, capture him, turn him into a puppet under the skirt who would listen to everything I say. If you failed, I would lose everything; if you succeeded, I would be able to get him, to get everything." In this moment, that gentle and lazy voice seemed to have appeared by her ear again. A person, or a role by the name of Zhang Xin Ai was hugging her tightly from behind in an attempt to merge into Ning Ning's flesh and bones like last time, by turning into smoke or water and becoming one.

"...But how can I do that?" Ning Ning struggled, saying in her heart, "This is Wen Yu, more...moreover, his brother is currently watching us."

Chapter 117

117: Sharing A Drink

Bedroom, an open wardrobe.

There were long dresses and short blouses, plain and colourful, a huge array of variety, they only had one common factor—expensive. A hand stroked the clothes from the left to right, stopping at a conservative white shirt. It hesitated for an instant before taking out the dress beside it.

Outside the door, Wen Yu was looking down at his watch when he suddenly heard Ning Ning's voice ring out from behind the door, "Wen Yu, can you come in?"

"What's the matter?" Wen Yu asked.

"Do me a favour." Ning Ning said, her only fear was that he would not come in. She lowered herself more and added another word in a frail manner, "Please."

Wen Yu hesitated for a moment before looking back at the door behind him. He reached out and pushed it open a little.

The door had been left unlocked. After it opened with a creak, he saw a woman with her back against him, standing in front of a huge full length mirror. She was wearing an evening gown, but the zipper on the back was not zipped up, so her entire back was revealed. The dress was black, the skin was fair, there were no other colours, but it was provocative and alluring.

Upon hearing the opening of the door, she turned her face to her right shoulder and said, "I can't reach the zipper, can you help me pull it up?"

With a bang, the door was closed again.

Ning Ning's reflection showed her shoulders slumped down, she let out a long breath of relief.

But she still had to ask, "What's the matter?"

"Wear something else." Wen Yu's voice rang out from the other side of the door.

"You don't like what I'm wearing now?" Ning Ning smiled. "Then

which one do you like?"

Wen Yu, "...Anything."

"The range of anything is so big." With a rustle, the dress fell to the ground, a pair of slender snow-white legs were standing in the dress, reflected in the mirror, "Why not? Come in and help me pick one?"

There was no movement outside the door.

The smile on Ning Ning's reflection widened, but her tone had a silent resentment, "I have never brought you any harm, why are you so afraid of me?"

"I'm afraid of accidents." Wen Yu said blandly, his voice had a trace of caution, "I don't want accidents like your dress suddenly falling to the ground when I am helping you to zip it up, or to see you naked when I open the door."

Haha! Ning Ning almost laughed out loud, but for the sake of abiding to the character specifications, she could only hold it in and not say a word.

How could Zhang Xin Ai not think of any methods of seduction Ning Ning could think of? How could Zhang Xin Ai not have used any methods of seduction Ning Ning could use?

Wen Yu did not get hooked in the past, once he found out the truth about her, what were the chances that he would still get hooked?

The worries in her heart were reduced by quite a lot. Wen Yu's reaction was like a key that had unlocked the invisible chains on her body, her hands and feet were no longer tied up, she even had to take a long time to pick her clothes. The door to the room was opened from inside, Ning Ning was leaning on the doorway with a Bohemian Dress, she had even applied a simple make up, smiling at him amorously. "I'm done."

A few minutes later, in the living room.

Wen Yu sat on the sofa, watching the woman in front of him walk back and forth. She placed a bottle of red wine and a wine glass on the table.

"Are you close with Pei Xuan?" He stared at her and asked.

"Hmm?" Ning Ning answered ambiguously. She opened the bottle of red wine, scarlet wine flowed into the wine glass.

"I just made a call, Pei Xuan was released from prison three days ago." Wen Yu said, "Why did he look for you specifically out of anyone

else?"

"You want to know why?" Ning Ning asked him with a smile.

"Yes." Wen Yu said.

"On one condition."

"What condition?"

"You know what I want." There were two people in the living room but only one wine glass. Ning Ning raised the glass and took a sip, the red wine dyeing her lips red, her lips dyeing the tip of the glass red in return. She licked her lips once then presented him with the wine glass.

Wen Yu stared at her for a while before reaching out to take the glass out of her hand. He took a sip out of the other side of the glass.

"Pei Xuan left five million with me." Ning Ning answered with satisfaction.

"Where's the money now?" Wen Yu immediately asked.

Ning Ning picked the glass up again and took another sip, then presented the glass back to him.

Wen Yu took the glass. Just as he was about to take a sip, fingers with scarlet painted fingernails reached over, spinning the glass around agilely so that the side with her lip stain faced him.

Scarlet wine, scarlet lip stain.

Wen Yu furrowed his brows. When he looked at Ning Ning again, he did not mask his disgust anymore.

Ning Ning, on the other hand, gently touched the surface of the wine then put the finger into her mouth. She clicked her tongue then smiled at him, it was pretty and cute, it even had a trace of evil. This was Zhang Xin Ai—the true Zhang Xin Ai. She had already pretended to be a good girl in front of Wen Yu in the past, unfortunately, she had been exposed. He knew what her true self was like, so she had no need to hide it.

Using the most desirable body in the mortal realm, using her sexiness that had seemingly successfully seduced everyone, using almost demon-like methods to seduce an angel to fall.

"Here, Dear, what are you waiting for?" She urged, "Don't you want to know who has the money? Don't you want to know what the person did after acquiring the money?"

Wen Yu hesitated a few times before he finally raised the glass. He placed the glass down after his lips had barely touched the tip, but even with that, his lips were stained with a little red. He took off one of his white gloves and used it as a handkerchief to wipe his mouth with.

Ning Ning sighed, that was Zhang Xin Ai's rage and her own relief.

"I have spent all of the money." She answered coldly. The next second, she smiled like a flower. "I didn't leave a single cent for him. How is that? Are you happy? I know that the two of you have bad blood, how can I let him off lightly?"

"You only thought that he wouldn't do anything to you even if you spent all his money." Wen Yu looked back at the direction of the bathroom. They had left the tap running so not to destroy the crime scene, water continued to splash about, the corpse was still soaking in the tub.

"...Unfortunately, Pei Xuan is unlike your other lovers." Wen Yu slowly turned his head back. "You cannot get rid of him at all. At most, you could only get rid of the person in the bathtub."

"What are you talking about?" Ning Ning looked at him with a lost expression. "The two of them clearly fought among themselves because they could not agree with their share of money, right?"

"You said it yourself. Five million, you had already spent all of it." Wen Yu shook his head. "There's no money left for them to bicker on their share about... Hold on."

He shot a weird look at Ning Ning, his gaze as sharp as a scalpel. "Did you not tell them that you had already spent the entire five million?"

Ning Ning smiled without saying a word.

She slowly got up and walked around the table, leaning towards Wen Yu as if she had no bones in the body. She looked like she wanted to sit on his lap but Wen Yu stood up from the sofa in an instant at the last moment, thus she missed and sat on nothing.

"Why are you avoiding me?" She sighed in self pity as she reached out and grabbed the wine glass in front of her, drinking the remaining wine in the glass in one go. Because she had drunk too ferociously, a stream of scarlet red wine trickled down the corner of her lips to her neck, all the way into her corsage.

She swallowed the wine in a gulp, then used a finger to touch her

lips. "Drink with me this once, then I'll tell you everything, I'll also tell the police everything."

Upon finishing her words, tears were streaming down from both eyes. She stammered, "The moment this matter goes public, I will lose all of my reputation, my career would be over, my fiance would want to break up with me when he comes back. I will lose everything. All I ask from you is one kiss, can you not even give me that?"

Ning Ning stared into his eyes nervously once she finished talking.

She was not worried about him rejecting her...she was worried that he would agree to it instead!

"I have no obligation to satisfy you." Wen Yu said coldly, "I can vaguely guess what happened in between, it was nothing but what you claimed to be your 'illness' acting up. Not only did you seduce Pei Xuan, you even seduced his lackey, then instigated a fight between them for the money, for you..."

"I didn't!" Ning Ning jumped up with tears streaming down her face, it was as if she had been dealt a great injustice. "You've wronged me!"

"I was just making a conjecture, the truth will be revealed once the police are here." Wen Yu immediately took out his phone as he finished speaking.

Ning Ning's face portrayed shock. After she came back to her senses, she frantically leapt at him to snatch his phone while mumbling, "You cannot do this to me!"

But Wen Yu broke free of her, walking out as he spoke, "Hello, there has been a murder here..."

Ning Ning sat on the floor and covered her face while she cried, but in contrast, she could not help but feel like she wanted to laugh in her mind.

Zhang Xin Ai, oh Zhang Xin Ai, you really shot yourself in the foot. Saying what you would say, doing what you would do, what would happen in the end? Your failure would just be repeated.

Ning Ning did not return to the beginning even when the police entered. Once her initial joy had dissipated, Ning Ning gradually calmed down and felt that something was off.

"Was her objective for especially giving me such a setting really to let me relive her failures?" Ning Ning thought.

Zhang Xin Ai was not an idiot, that was definitely not a possibility.

As a masked person, their objective in giving their ticket to a person must be for the sake of changing their own fate. But which part was she exactly trying to change—precisely, which day's fate was she trying to change?

It was currently Thursday, the sky was already dark after she had her testimony taken down. After tonight, there would only be two days left before the movie would end.

"Just two more days," Ning Ning told herself, "I just have to get to the weekend."

She had originally wanted to take a taxi home on her own, but after she came out (of the police station), she saw a person pacing up and down, waiting anxiously for her.

"Big Sister Little Ai." Upon seeing her come out, Li Shan Zhu ran over ecstatically, like a teary-eyed puppy.

"What are you doing here?" Ning Ning pushed her sunglasses up.

Li Shan Zhu said bashfully, "I went to look for you at your house today, only to discover that you were not at home, there was even police tape at the doorway. I asked the policemen at the door, they said that there was a murder at your house, I was shocked at that time...it's a good thing you are alright."

It's a good thing you are alright...

Ning Ning didn't know whether to laugh or cry, she said, "The person who died wasn't me, it was another...forget it, let's talk when we get back. Are there any reporters outside the door?"

Although she was very successful in her relationships, she did not enjoy the same success in her career. Zhang Xin Ai might have a lot of puppets under her skirt, but she could not grow in show business. Big Brother Hai had paid to get a lot of female lead roles for her, but only the show became popular while she did not. To quote a certain director, "She used up all her energy on interpersonal relationships, she has no acting skills."

But even so, she was a familiar face because she was frequently on screen, she could be considered to be a celebrity. Moreover, what happened was not a small matter—someone dying was a big matter—a few tabloid reporters had come in throngs upon hearing the news, they were all loitering outside the door.

The moment Ning Ning walked out of the police station, camera lenses rushed up to her.

"Miss Zhang, what is your relationship with the victim?"

"Why did he die in your house?"

"Miss Zhang, please say something..."

Ning Ning squeezed into a taxi under Li Shan Zhu's protection. However, there were reporters who were standing in front of the taxi causing the driver to not dare to start driving. A leg suddenly reached out from beside him and stepped on the accelerator for him.

As the taxi sped forward, the reporters stepped back in fright, it also frightened the driver.

"What are you waiting for?" Li Shan Zhu retracted his leg and smiled at him innocuously. "Start driving."

The taxi drove off. Once it sent them to their destination, it quickly sped off. The driver did not even dare to stop for a second, as if the passengers he had were not human but very hungry venomous snakes.

A key opened the door to the room, two people walked into the door one after another.

"Big Sister Little Ai, stay here for the moment." Li Shan Zhu said, "This is the old house me and brother used to live in. Ever since my brother bought a new house, I have been living here alone."

"Then where will you live?" Ning Ning asked.

"I will live at school." Li Shan Zhu looked down bashfully, sneaking a glance at her. "But if you are afraid of being alone, I can also come over and accompany you."

Wasn't there enough trouble already? Ning Ning shook her head. "It's fine."

She took a few steps forward and scanned the house. All of a sudden, she stopped in her tracks and looked back.

Li Shan Zhu remained firmly rooted in the ground, his head hung very low, his slightly long fringe covered his face and his expression.

"Shan Zhu?" Ning Ning asked, "What's wrong?"

"...If it were me, I would never have treated you the way he did." He said while looking down.

"He?" Ning Ning said doubtfully, "Who are you talking about?"

"Wen Yu." Li Shan Zhu slowly looked up. An innocuous face, a slightly bashful smile. "If you had not called him but called me

instead...I would not have called the police, I would have even helped you deal with the corpse in the bathroom."

TN: Hey guys, it's been approximately a year—a year and a week to be exact—since we started this project. I just want to say thanks to our readers, you've made this more worthwhile and fulfilling than I had ever imagined it to be when I first started it, I hope you guys had as much enjoyment reading this novel as I did, I also hope that it made your year a little better. Last of all, I would like to shamelessly plug the discord server, I sincerely hope that avid readers would join and mingle with the other readers there, till next time!

Chapter 118

118: Countdown

"...I was joking." Li Shan Zhu quickly shrugged and smiled. "Alright, I'll go get toiletries for you from the supermarket downstairs. Besides a toothbrush and a towel, what else do you want?"

Was he really joking? Ning Ning looked at him doubtfully. "Is there disposable underwear?"

"Under, underwear?" Li Shan Zhu's voice suddenly raised eight pitches. He covered his gradually blushing face, stammering, "Tha, that..."

"I was joking with you." Ning Ning smiled. "I will buy those myself."

The two of them went to the supermarket together. It might be because she wore a hat, sunglasses and a face mask, or that Zhang Xin Ai was actually not that famous, but no one had recognised her. Toothbrush, towel, underwear—they bought a lot using Li Shan Zhu's money.

When they were paying, Ning Ning had a glimpse of his wallet. A poor student, he did not have much money in it, it was emptied out after they bought the toiletries.

"Let me..." Just as Ning Ning reached into her purse, her vision darkened and she was standing in the police station again—watching as Li Shan Zhu approached her from a distance.

How could she have forgotten? Zhang Xin Ai was good at mooching off people—mooching off a meal, an opportunity, a popularity—as long as someone was willing to foot the bill, she would never spend a single cent.

That was why this time she was empty-handed. Not only did she not help pay a single cent, she didn't even help him with the bags, smiling as she watched Li Shan Zhu bring the bags upstairs.

Li Shan Zhu scurried around alone. He helped her put the new items in their places and made her bed. He got so warm that he started to sweat. When he came out of the bedroom, he looked at the ceiling fan, the blades of the fan were spinning leisurely, Ning Ning's wavy hair fluttering gently. She twisted open a lip balm in her hand, lightly applying it on her lips that were as plump as a peach, soft and

moist.

She looked up at Li Shan Zhu and said, "Come here."

Li Shan Zhu stared at her lips absentmindedly, unable to speak for a moment. He opened up his stride and walked towards her. The closer he got, the less he dared to look at her, he was even more at a loss when she reached out with her lip balm.

"Big, Big Sister Little Ai..." He did not know what to do.

"Don't move." Ning Ning shushed him. "Don't speak."

Li Shan Zhu stayed rooted on the spot obediently, letting her slowly apply the lip balm on his lips as she pleased.

"Done." She retracted her hand with a smile after a moment. "The weather is too dry, your lips were chapped. Alright, I'll go take a shower."

"Oh, oh..." Li Shan Zhu answered inattentively. His eyes were following Ning Ning's figure uncontrollably, watching as she grabbed the pajamas and underwear that she had just bought before walking towards the bathroom. She suddenly turned around when she was halfway there and tossed something at him, "Catch."

Li Shan Zhu reached out and caught it reflexively.

He looked down, it was a tube of lip balm.

"A gift for you." Ning Ning said.

Li Shan Zhu held the lip balm with both his hands—as if he was holding an imperial edict from the emperor, a goddess' feather coat, the jar of pure water and willow leaf bestowed by Guanyin¹. That almost pious look from being practically overwhelmed by an unexpected favour was truly cute and laughable, Ning Ning could not help but smile at him before turning around to walk into the bathroom.

This was Zhang Xin Ai, every cent of her money had to be spent on something worthy, it had to let the other party feel her affection, it had to let the other party feel like they had gained something, it had to let the other like her more.

Just like Li Shan Zhu right now.

When he would think back on this day in the future, he would definitely not remember getting his wallet wrung dry and the hardship he undertook in cleaning up the place. What he would remember—what he would remember the most—would only be the lip balm in his

hand.

Water was spraying out of the showerhead like a heavy rain. Ning Ning met this rain head on, sweeping her hair behind her head with both her hands and sighing in her heart. "That's just like a boy experiencing his first love...that tube of lip balm was only fifty dollars2."

A phone suddenly rang outside, it was Ning Ning's phone.

Her heart skipped a beat. She hoped that the person who was calling was not Big Brother Hai, Little Ke or any of her lovers. She frantically turned off the showerhead and shouted, "Shan Zhu, help me bring my phone to me."

The ringing was getting closer, finally arriving outside of the bathroom door. A crack slowly opened up, a hand holding a phone carefully squeezed through.

"Thanks." Ning Ning desperately grabbed the phone out of his hands. Afraid that he would hear her conversation, she turned on the showerhead again, the pitter-patter of the fine rain was hitting the floor. She answered the phone, "Hello."

"It's me." Pei Xuan's voice rang out from the other side.

...The person who was the hardest to send away had appeared!

"You actually still dare call me?" Ning Ning took a deep breath. "The police are looking for you everywhere."

"Then, are you hoping that they'll find me?" Pei Xuan asked.

"...Of course." Ning Ning said coldly, "Did you know how much trouble you have brought me by killing someone at my house?"

"Heh heh. After not meeting for a few years, your method in incriminating people had improved." Pei Xuan began to laugh, Ning Ning could not figure out whether he was praising her or mocking her. "Your guts have grown a lot too, you actually went through with it and killed Crew-Cut."

"What are you talking about?" Ning Ning was shocked by his accusation. "You were the one who killed him!"

"I did not. I have finally gotten out of prison, I wouldn't want to immediately go back in again." Pei Xuan said leisurely, "Besides, you should be very clear on what kind of person I am... If I wanted to kill a person, I would typically not do it myself."

Ning Ning thought back on it, that seemed to really be the case.

Ever since this fellow started having lackeys, he would let someone else do all his dirty works. Moreover, he had not killed anyone himself proactively, not because he had mellowed, but because...he had grown more knowledgeable from being educated—he knew that the crime for killing someone was too big, so he would not do it himself. If there was a need for it, he would get someone else to do it.

"...Alright, I should get on the train." Pei Xuan said, "This should be our last phone call, Little Ai. Take care of yourself."

"Wait!" Ning Ning shouted frantically, "What do you mean take care of myself, do you know something?"

The train started to *choo choo*, along with another ear piercing *ka-cha*, it sounded like Pei Xuan had casually tossed his phone on the train tracks and had it crushed under the wheel.

Why he made this call, Ning Ning was not sure. Maybe he just wanted to catch up, or maybe he wanted to see if she was the actual murderer. If what he had said was true, if neither of them were the murderers, then who was it?

Once she was done with her shower in a hurry and changed into her pajamas, Ning Ning used her new towel to dry her hair as she looked at Li Shan Zhu who was sitting across from her. "It's already late, are you not returning to school yet?"

Li Shan Zhu took a look out of the window awkwardly.

Ning Ning followed his line of sight. Heavy rain splashed on the window, a lightning abruptly flashed across the sky like a dragon or a snake slithering among the dark clouds.

"You're already an adult, you're actually still scared of thunder?" Ning Ning ridiculed him.

"That's not it." Li Shan Zhu retorted frantically as if he was afraid of being looked down at by her, "I just, I just wanted to wait for the rain to stop before leaving."

"Okay, okay, I believe you." Ning Ning snickered. She walked into the kitchen to pour water for herself.

All of a sudden, thunder crashed. The hand she was using to pour water shuddered, causing water to splatter on the table and flow down to the floor like a snake.

"Come to think of it.." Ning Ning continued to pour water, asking as if she had no other intention, "When I left with the police to record my testimony, the corpse was transported at the same time, how did you

know...that he died in the bathroom?"

There was silence behind her.

There was only the sound of the water poured by her along with the rain splashing on the window.

"...The water is spilling over." Li Shan Zhu's voice suddenly rang out behind her. It was so close, she could even feel his breath on her neck, giving her goosebumps.

Ning Ning frantically put down the water jug then looked down at the glass that was filled with water. The transparent glass had colourful reflections, it was tainted with her colour, as well as his.

"...It was the police who told me." Li Shan Zhu said from her side, "Maybe he was a rookie, that was why he was not tight-lipped and accidentally leaked the location of the corpse to me."

"Is that so?" Ning Ning slowly turned her head and smiled at Li Shan Zhu who was behind her. "To leak such a thing, that rookie must be really new."

Li Shan Zhu smiled along with her, it was still the same innocuous smile.

"...Ah." Ning Ning suddenly turned and looked out of the window. "The rain seems to have stopped."

She opened the window and reached out to catch the rain, then nodded in confirmation to Li Shan Zhu. "The rain has stopped, you can go back to school now."

Li Shan Zhu looked like he couldn't bear to leave, but he still obediently listened to her. "Alright, I'll be going. Big Sister Little Ai, you must be tired from today, have an early night."

Ning Ning, "Alright, good night."

Li Shan Zhu, "Good night."

After she watched him leave, Ning Ning did not leave the doorway. She put her eye on the peephole and stared at him as he walked down the stairs, then waited for another ten minutes before she went into the bedroom and changed into clothes for going out. She then reached out and pulled on the door to the entrance.

The door handle clacked as she pulled on it, but the door in front of her did not move.

...Li Shan Zhu had locked the door from the outside...

"Hello." Ning Ning gave Li Shan Zhu a call, she said unhappily, "Did you lock the door?"

"That's right." Li Shan Zhu admitted frankly, his tone was innocent and caring. "You're a woman living alone, I am afraid of your safety, so I locked the door for you... What's the matter? What are you going out this late for?"

"...It's nothing," Ning Ning said, "I wanted to go downstairs to buy something."

"What are you missing?" Li Shan Zhu said gently, "I'll come back and get it for you."

Ning Ning, "Tampons."

"T, t, t..." Li Shan Zhu used a voice akin to a mosquito's and said, "...Hold on."

He had not gone far at all. He reappeared in front of Ning Ning five minutes later with blushing cheeks, stuffing a plastic bag in her arms, inside were a few packs of tampons.

"Alright. It's fine now, you should quickly go back to school, otherwise the dormitory entrance is going to be locked up."

"Alright, I'm leaving." Li Shan Zhu said with a smile.

Was he really leaving?

After she switched off the lights in the living room and bedroom, Ning Ning did not immediately go to bed. She tiptoed to the window and quietly pulled the curtain open a little, looking towards downstairs.

Li Shan Zhu was standing at the foot of the building, looking up at her with a smile.

She quickly pulled the curtain back and dove into her blanket.

She did not sleep that night, she had her eyes opened almost through the entire night.

It was Friday, the date was 16th July 2004.

Two days away from Zhang Xin Ai's death.

1Guanyin is the Buddhist bodhisattva associated with compassion. She was first given the appellation of "Goddess of Mercy" or the Mercy Goddess by Jesuit missionaries in China. The Chinese name Guanyin is

short for Guanshiyin, which means "[The One Who] Perceives the Sounds of the World.

2This is 50 Chinese Yuan which equates to 7.65usd at the moment.

Chapter 119

119: Kept in Captivity

Two days to go, everything was normal.

At the very least, they looked normal on the surface.

"Big Sister Little Ai." Li Shan Zhu's smiling face greeted her the moment the door opened, he was holding a plastic bag. "I brought breakfast for you."

Breakfast was soy milk, fried dough fritters, fried sesame balls and red bean buns .

"You don't like these?" He surveyed the look on Ning Ning's face. "Are they too greasy? Do you want me to go downstairs to buy milk and bread?"

"No need, I don't have much of an appetite this morning." Ning Ning had only wanted to say that as a formality, but she actually lost her appetite very quickly.

Her phone which did not ring once the entire night suddenly rang now, it was also a call that brought her extremely bad news.

"You don't have to come to the office today." It was Zhang Xin Ai's manager, Big Sister Wu, who said this with a heavy tone. There was a din around her. Ning Ning could somewhat hear someone shout, "What is the identity of the man who died in Zhang Xin Ai's house?"

"Tell Zhang Xin Ai to come out and give us an explanation!"

"It was such a waste for I to treat her as a goddess, what had she been doing behind our backs?"

"Did the matter get out of hand?" Ning Ning asked, "Wasn't everything fine yesterday?"

"It was fine, but last night, a lot of posts that slandered you suddenly appeared online, someone even called the press." Big Sister Wu said bluntly, "Whom did you offend? This is someone trying to gravely screw you over."

Li Shan Zhu sat at the corner of her eyes, gently nibbling on a bun like a girl.

"I'll think of a way to suppress this, you should quickly give Big Brother Hai a call." Her manager said in a low voice, "Big Brother Hai knows the heads of a few of the press."

"Got it." Ning Ning answered.

After the call ended, before she could give Big Brother Hai a call, Li Shan Zhu had already asked curiously, "Something the matter?"

"Something came up at the office." Ning Ning took a glance at him.

"Hmm..." Li Shan Zhu looked like he wanted to say something.

"What's wrong?" He was being very obvious, Ning Ning had to ask him as a matter of course, "Do you know something?"

"I couldn't sleep last night, so I got on the internet. I saw that there were suddenly a lot of posts criticising you." Li Shan Zhu muttered, "They said that you were a woman with loose morals, that you were having inappropriate relationships with men in and out of the business... I could not restrain my anger and fought with them."

Ning Ning sniggered, she went over and rubbed his hair.

"Poor little thing. Look at you, veins are appearing on your eyeballs." She said gently, patting him like she was patting her beloved pet, "Actually, you don't have to fight with them, this incident will be over soon enough."

"Really?" Li Shan Zhu looked at her in a naive and ignorant manner, as if he really did not know anything, as if the person who had spread the information online and called the press last night was really not him.

"Of course." Ning Ning told him assuredly, "These types of gossip based on baseless accusations appear everyday, how many of them are real? They can't even provide evidence, they can only discuss the matter blindly on the internet."

Li Shan Zhu's eyes sparkled for a moment, he asked her curiously, "Big Sister Little Ai, you're really not sad at all?"

"My days might become difficult to get through, but it would only be for these few days." Ning Ning sat back across the table, grabbing a red bean bun. "Do you think that those people who are criticising me don't have to work, don't have to earn money, don't have to eat? I don't believe that they would be able to stand guard in front of my office everyday, holding banners around to cause me unhappiness... Hmm! This bun is pretty tasty, I will eat it along the way."

She chewed on the bun, looking like she couldn't wait to leave the house.

Li Shan Zhu suddenly called out to her from behind, "Big Sister Little Ai."

Ning Ning who was about to walk downstairs stopped in her tracks and looked back.

"You still have me." Li Shan Zhu stood at the doorway, both hands were balled up into fists. Like a boy who was about to profess his love to a girl, he finally worked up the courage and shouted at her, "If you find that the days are hard, then come back here, I will protect you."

Ning Ning gazed at him for a while before suddenly flashing a smile. She took out the bun from her mouth and asked, "Protecting me in your brother's stead?"

Li Shan Zhu was taken aback. He then smiled, a smile so small that it was unclear whether he was happy or sad, nodding. "Yes, I will protect you in my brother's stead."

"...Alright." Ning Ning's smile was also small, it looked like she was giving her promise, it also looked like she was just casually saying, "If I find that the days are hard, I will come to rely on you and ask for your support."

She did not think that her days would actually become really hard.

After leaving Li Shan Zhu's house, she once again adorned her shades, face mask and hat as she took a taxi back home. When she was about ten meters away, she saw that there was a crowd below her building.

...This was terrible, her home address had been leaked.

Among those people were reporters and hardcore fans. One of them was burning all sorts of things at the side—things like Zhan Xin Ai's poster and movie discs—black smoke was billowing. The reporters at the side took photos enthusiastically, Ning Ning only took one look before she told the driver, "Turn back."

Going over now would only get herself into trouble, what would she do if the fans get rowdy and burn her along with her merchandise?

"Where to now?" The driver asked her.

Where should she go next? Ning Ning grabbed her phone. "Drive straight for now, I'll make a call."

She gave Big Brother Hai a call first.

He answered after the phone rang ten times, his voice sounded lazy and impatient. "I'm in a meeting right now, call me back later... *Clack, doo, doo, doo*—"

Ning Ning rolled her eyes before giving Little Ke a call.

Little Ke, on the other hand, answered very quickly, but his tone was ice cold, "What is it?"

Hearing his unfriendly tone, Ning Ning softened her voice and asked, "What is it? You believe those rumours on the internet as well?"

"Heh heh. A man died at your house, you should give me an explanation. What happened there?" Little Ke laughed coldly.

"You forgot that there was a key in my door?" Ning Ning reminded him, "A hardcore fan had secretly duplicated my key and snuck into my house."

"Ah." Little Ke remembered that incident after she reminded him, his tone became more gentle, "So that's what happened, then...are you alright?"

"He forced me to be his girlfriend. I didn't agree, I ran away while he wasn't paying attention." Ning Ning sighed. "Who knew that when I got someone to come back and take a look with me, we would discover that he had already killed himself in my bathroom."

"This person truly deserved to die. It's one thing to die, his death has to bring you so much trouble." Little Ke said angrily, "Those people who spread rumours on the internet as well, they also deserve to die."

"It's a pity that most people would believe in the rumours and not me." Ning Ning said melancholically, "Weren't you the same way just now?"

Little Ke cursed and swore frantically, wishing that he could immediately fly over to her and dig out his heart and lungs for her to see.

"Alright," Ning Ning sniggered a little, "I forgive you. Right, is your house at Hubin District still empty?"

As the son of the richest man in the area, Little Ke barely stayed at school. Most of the time, he would live in the big house his rich father bought for him. He used to always invite Zhang Xin Ai to stay over for a couple of days in the past, but Zhang Xin Ai had always looked for a

reason to reject him. Now that Ning Ning who was wearing the skin of Zhang Xin Ai had brought it up proactively, he instead hesitated for a bit. "...I had already lent it out, rented it out."

Such a clumsy excuse, but Ning Ning did not intend to expose him, she said regretfully, "If that's the case then forget it. I'll look for another place to stay."

"Why are you not going home?"

"There are a lot of reporters and hardcore fans outside of my house."

"Then...I'll rent out a place for you?"

"No need, I'll think of a way." Ning Ning hung up. She told the driver who had been waiting for her, "Continue to drive back to the place where I boarded the car."

They circled around and returned to their starting point.

Li Shan Zhu seemed to have long predicted that she would come back. Before Ning Ning could knock on the door, he had already opened it and greeted her with a smile, "Big Sister Ai, you're back."

...Don't tell me you had been standing behind the door all this while, looking through the peephole? Ning Ning kept this sentence to herself. She took off her shoes and entered. The ceiling fan spun above their heads leisurely, Li Shan Zhu placed a glass of cold water in front of her.

"Some people were so hard to shake off whenever I wanted to shake them off in the past. Now that I'm in trouble, they will break contact with me before I can say anything." Ning Ning picked up the glass of water and drank a mouthful of water. She turned and smiled at Li Shan Zhu. "Don't you think a woman like me is sad and ridiculous?"

She saw no trace of surprise on his face.

That was also to be expected.

Big Brother Hai and Little Ke could not have had such a big change in their attitudes because of a few rumours online, there had to be a certain person who called them and divulged some evidence—conclusive evidence that would be able to prove her bad nature.

How did this person get Big Brother Hai and Little Ke's phone numbers?

It was very simple, he had taken a look at her phone while she was taking a shower.

"Big Sister Little Ai." He squatted in front of her like a golden retriever, placing both his hands on her legs and looking up at her, his eyes were full of attachment and consolation. "You still have me. I'm different from those people, I will stand by your side no matter when."

Ning Ning looked at him with a complicated expression.

"I might not have much money, but I can cook."

"I can also do things like wash the dishes and fix computers."

"I will scold whoever scolds you, no matter if it's in real life or on the internet."

Li Shan Zhu carefully placed his face on her leg, then blissfully squinted his eyes.

"Once I graduate from school, I will work and earn money." He rested his head on Ning Ning's leg, his blissful expression looked like he was having a sweet dream, he mumbled dreamily, "One day I will become very reliable, like Big Brother... No, more reliable than Big Brother...Big Sister Little Ai, I beg you, rely on me."

Ning Ning looked down and thought, Zhang Xin Ai, exactly what kind of person did you mess with?

Everything that had happened before, were they a string of coincidences, or were they a string of calculated events? Were they a string of natural disasters or were they a string of man-made disasters?

"Zhang Xin Ai, you've met your match." Ning Ning looked at Li Shan Zhu who was nestled on her leg like a pet, thinking to herself, "If everything was according to his plan, then he was planning on pushing you to the edge, then raise you in captivity like a pet."

Adore you, protect you, feed you; but he would not allow you to leave this house, he would not allow you to show yourself outside, he would not allow you to have any intimate interactions with the opposite or even the same gender; it would be best that you were spat on by society, best that you had no home to return to and could only come back here.

"...Make lunch for me." Ning Ning said. When Li Shan Zhu looked up at her, she smiled mischievously. "I will consider it if lunch is good."

Li Shan Zhu's eyes brightened, he frantically jumped up and ran towards the kitchen, "It's a promise..."

He rummaged through his cupboards and fridge before rushing out

with an awkward expression. "What do you want to eat? I will go buy the groceries now."

"Make what you are best at." Ning Ning supported her chin with her hand. "Make less of it. I might have to eat it everyday eventually, I don't want to get sick of it too quickly."

Li Shan Zhu was stunned, his face turning red with excitement. He nodded with all his might, then grabbed his wallet and went out.

After watching him leave, the smile on Ning Ning's face slowly faded away. She took her phone out.

Zhang Xin Ai was willing to spend her days like this? No, she would not give up this easily before contacting every single man on her phone. From her point of view, every single man was a toy for her entertainment, they were also a chip for her to get out of a pinch.

The phone rang for a while. The moment Wen Yu's voice rang out from the other side, Ning Ning started crying with chagrin, sobbing. "Will you feel guilty if I jump off a building right now?"

Chapter 120

120: Patient

"Wait up, wait up!" Li Shan Zhu shouted breathlessly at the elevator with a grocery basket in hand.

The doors that were about to close then opened up again. He walked into the elevator and held his knees as he panted, then looked up at the middle-aged woman and smiled. "Thank you, Auntie Zhang."

"Little Li, you have people over at your place, right?" The middle-aged woman looked at the groceries in his basket. "You bought so much, do you have a lot of guests?"

Li Shan Zhu blushed. "No, just one."

Middle-aged women are all half a detective, she knew what was going on with one look at his expression, she smiled. "Girlfriend?"

Li Shan Zhu blushed even harder, he shook his head and said, "Not yet, she...she said if I can make a good meal, she would seriously consider it."

"Ah, then you cannot be careless with your cooking." The middle-aged woman started to give him ideas. "Do you want Auntie Zhang to teach you a few secret recipes? When Auntie Zhang was younger, I relied on these few dishes to conquer Uncle's stomach before conquering his heart..."

The child she had been holding hands with looked at her naively, "But Mom, you only know how to cook instant noodles, instant noodles and instant noodles..."

"Little brat, why do you have to be so honest!"

After bidding farewell to the mother and daughter, Li Shan Zhu returned to his home.

The basket was very heavy, not only were there all sorts of vegetables, there were also fish and meat. Just like what Auntie Zhang had said, if everything were to be used, it was enough to serve a full table of people.

He took a deep breath before he called out, "Big Sister Little Ai, open the door for me."

No one answered for a very long time.

The once excited smile on his face slowly faded away. He placed the heavy basket on the floor, took out his key and opened the door. The moment he opened the door, he forced a smile on his face, "Big Sister Little Ai, I'm sorry I came back late, I'll immediately cook for you."

The house was empty, no one was in sight. The house was in dead silence, even the pair of shoes Ning Ning had worn to his place was nowhere to be seen.

The colour of Li Shan Zhu's face paled. He tossed the basket in his hands and rushed into the door.

But Ning Ning was not in the house.

"Big Sister Little Ai." Li Shan Zhu stood in the living room with his head lowered. His expression was unclear, only his suppressed voice was audible, "Where did you run off to..."

At the same time, on a certain rooftop.

At noon, the sun was scorching. If a person were to stand under the blazing sun for too long, their vision would begin to go hazy, as if the entire person was melting under the sun rays.

"The next scene is crucial." Ning Ning closed the phone in her hand. She looked at herself, or rather, she looked at Zhang Xin Ai and said, "As a woman, there is no way to move Wen Yu. If I want to move him, I can only do it as one identity...a patient."

Ten minutes later, a taxi stopped below the rooftop.

A tiny dot emerged from the taxi, looking up towards the rooftop. He then hastened his footsteps and entered the building.

Not long later, footsteps rang out behind Ning Ning. They got closer to her, until finally, a handsome young man stepped over the last step of the staircase and stepped on the roof.

It was Wen Yu.

He stopped in his tracks and looked at the long-haired woman not far in front of him.

She had his back towards him as she leaned on the guardrail by the side of the roof, there was a cracking sound from her biting on something. The sound suddenly stopped and she slowly turned her head around.

It was a popsicle.

When a person ate a popsicle, they would only eat the ice, but she was chewing the stick along with the ice. That wooden stick was roughened from her biting, it had teeth marks all over it.

"You're here." She smiled, Wen Yu seemed to be able to see wooden scraps on her mouth.

"...What's in your mouth?" Wen Yu asked.

Ning Ning was taken aback. She looked down and spat, wood fragments and crushed ice fell onto her palm. She furrowed her brows then tossed those things away along with the half-eaten popsicle. She bent down. After some rustles, she took out a tub of ice cream from the plastic bag beside her feet.

Wen Yu scanned the contents of that plastic bag.

Potato chips, chocolate, cake, cookies...

They were all high calorie tidbits.

"288 calories." Ning Ning scooped a spoon of ice cream and reached out to him with it, "Want some?"

Wen Yu shook his head.

She immediately put the spoon in her mouth. One spoon after another, the ice cream that had 288 calories was quickly wiped out by her. She did not even wipe the cream left on her lips before immediately opening a bag of potato chips. She revelled in the aroma of the bag of potato chips then looked at Wen Yu. "500 calories, do you want some?"

"Aren't you worried that you won't fit in your costumes the next time you act?" Wen Yu asked abruptly.

The hand that opened the bag froze. "I am."

"Since you're worried, why are you still eating?" Wen Yu asked.

"Only when I'm chewing something..." Ning Ning leaned back on the railing, putting potato chips in her mouth as she looked at the ground below. "Will I not want to jump down."

Wen Yu gazed at her for a moment before he suddenly shook his head with a smile. "You will not jump, the person you love the most is yourself."

Upon finishing his words, he turned around and left. Step by step, he walked towards the staircase, and in the end, he left the building

and flagged down a taxi.

Before he got into the car, Wen Yu inexplicably looked up.

On the very high roof, there was a tiny figure bent over the railing, looking down at him, shovelling potato chips into her mouth one handful by one handful.

He narrowed his eyes, as if fragments of potato chips had fallen into his eyes.

The car he was in drove on for ten minutes. The figure which had been continuously chewing potato chips would not disappear from his sights. The frown on Wen Yu's face grew deeper right up until the taxi suddenly came to a screeching halt.

"...What's happening there?" Wen Yu's attention was drawn towards the people outside the window.

"They look like they are burning something." The driver answered. He slowed down the car and drove past the crowd.

It was only when they got closer that Wen Yu realised that they had passed by Zhang Xin Ai's house without him noticing. This woman clearly had skillful means, but she was unexpectedly unpopular with the audience. When she was at the peak of her popularity, there weren't this many fans by her residence, but once she was in trouble, there were actually so many haters who showed up to burn her posters, her discs, greeting her ancestors.

How many of these people were true fans? How many of them were there to kick her while she was down?

That was really strange. What happened to Zhang Xin Ai's good interpersonal relationships? The lovers she had? Why were they not standing up for her at this time?

"...Turn back." Wen Yu said suddenly.

The taxi returned back to the starting point again.

Wen Yu returned back to the roof again.

A mess entered his sight. Empty bags were scattered on the floor, it looked like someone had just had a banquet here. Ning Ning had her back to him, she was curled up among the mess on the floor. He quickly walked over to her. As he was halfway there, he smelled something strange and sour. He only realised once he got close that there was not only rubbish by her side, there was also a puddle of vomit.

Wen Yu frowned as he looked down at her. "You ate everything?"

The previously bulging plastic bag that was enough to feed a person for three days had long been emptied. The brightly coloured packing was thrown on the floor—the chocolate, cookie, cake, etc... Some of them were in Ning Ning's stomach, some of them became part of the puddle of vomit on the floor.

No matter how pretty a woman was, she would look as filthy as a beggar among that pile of stuff.

If her lovers from the past were to see her like this, they would definitely cover their nose and run as far away as possible, those with mysophobia might even delete her phone number as they ran away; but Wen Yu did not. He bent down and helped her up. "Hold on, I'll send you to the hospital."

As she had just vomited, her breath had a smelly and sour smell, but Wen Yu was not disgusted by it. On the contrary, he got a little bit closer to her to make out what she was chanting.

"288 calories, 500 calories, 586 calories, 433 calories..." A string of numbers came out of Ning Ning's mouth, they were the calorie content of the snacks she had just eaten. She looked like she was in a trance. "I can't eat anymore, help me eat a little, stop me quickly...I cannot control myself anymore..."

As she finished, she raised a trembling hand which was holding half a piece of cookie, it continued to put the cookie into her mouth.

Wen Yu held her hand with a heavy expression on his face. "Don't give up on yourself."

Ning Ning looked distracted for a moment before she focused on his face. "Everybody has already given up on me."

"So you have to reflect upon yourself." Wen Yu bridled and carried her once he said that. He continued to talk as he went down the stairs. "Others would be sincere to you if you were sincere to them, they would treat you like a toy if you treated them like a toy. For the secret which you thought could stay safe forever to be exposed...it was only a matter of time."

Ning Ning fell silent for a moment before she asked, "You hate me so much, why did you come back?"

"Because I am a doctor and you are a patient." Wen Yu said blandly. He walked out of the building in that moment, stepping out of the darkness. "I don't like you, but I will not give up on you."

Ning Ning looked at him for a moment before she suddenly smiled. "With a personality like yours, it's only a matter of time before you get taken advantage of."

Unexpectedly, Wen Yu looked down and smiled back at her. "With a personality like yours, it's also only a matter of time before you get taken advantage of."

Ning Ning was stunned.

Whether he actually saw through her acting or not, Ning Ning was not sure. He might not have seen through her, that was why he brought her to the hospital and paid for the medical fees—he even agreed to give her one counselling session after the surgery. Or maybe he had seen through her, that was why he came and went away very quickly, he did not stay longer than he needed to and had a professional look on him.

If this were the real Zhang Xin Ai, she would probably have been fuming. Even after she paid the price of gaining three kilograms, all she got was three minutes of pity from him.

Ning Ning on the other hand breathed a sigh of relief. She did not need him to love her, she had only needed him to pity her and give her a little bit of help so she could hold out until the weekend. That was it.

"Just one more day." She told herself before entering the operating theater, "Just one more day, everything would end."

In the end, just as she came out from the operating theater, she received a call from Li Shan Zhu.

"Big Sister Little Ai." He wept on the phone, asking almost as if all hope had turned into dust, "Will you feel guilty if I jump off a building right now?"

Ning Ning, "..."

The time was Friday, July 16th 2004, eight at night.

There was only one and a half days before Zhang Xin Ai's death.

Just one and a half days!! Can you not!!

Chapter 121

121: Infinite Death

Saturday, July 17th, 2004. In a certain psychological clinic.

Wen Yu placed two teacups on the table. He took a glance at Ning Ning's pocket. "Are you not answering that?"

From when she first sat down, her phone inside the pocket of her blouse had been ringing non-stop. She silenced it once again and told him helplessly, "It's my suitor. He's using suicide as an excuse to try and get me to meet him."

Wen Yu *oh*-ed. "Then are you going?"

"I don't want to go." Ning Ning sighed. She got up and said, "But I have to go...thanks for your chrysanthemum tea."

Ning Ning pushed the door open and left. About a minute later, a staff member knocked on the door, holding an electric kettle in his hand. "Doctor Wen, the tea is ready."

The customer had left, just one cup of tea would do.

Tea with golden flower petals was poured into the cup.

Wen Yu raised his eyebrows and looked towards the direction Ning Ning left in. That was weird, how did she know it was chrysanthemum tea?

Of course Ning Ning knew.

Because this was the third time Ning Ning had stepped into Wen Yu's office.

The first time she had refused to answer the phone. The second time she had refused to leave. In the end, when she drank the chrysanthemum tea on both occasions, she returned to the beginning for both occasions.

Who knew that Zhang Xin Ai actually cared about that pure and innocent teen? She actually had to answer his call and meet him.

"Hello." Ning Ning answered the phone after she stepped out of the clinic. She said helplessly, "Stop crying, I can't even make out what you are saying anymore."

"You wouldn't answer my calls." Li Shan Zhu's voice was hoarse from crying. "I thought you were going to ignore me forever."

"Didn't I tell you yesterday? I wasn't feeling well, I had to have a minor surgery at the hospital." Ning Ning explained.

"Then why didn't you tell me which hospital you were at? Why didn't you let me visit you?" Li Shan Zhu questioned her, "Who...whom did you let accompany you there?"

A feeling burst in Ning Ning's heart, she forced a smile and said, "Why could I not have gone alone?"

Li Shan Zhu fell silent.

"...Alright." Ning Ning laughed at herself. "How could a person like me go to the hospital alone."

Her weakest and most pitiful side had been used to gain pity from men, how could she hide her pain and secretly cry by her lonesome?

"...Where are you? I'll come over and fetch you now." Li Shan Zhu seemed to not be willing to pursue the matter anymore, he started to probe for the answer he wanted the most.

"It's fine, I'll take a taxi..."

"Where are you?" Before she could finish, Li Shan Zhu interrupted her. He repeated what he said previously as if he was possessed, "I'll come over and fetch you."

Ning Ning impatiently told him the location of a hotel.

Li Shan Zhu came on a taxi very quickly. He rushed towards Ning Ning the moment he got off the taxi, grabbing her wrist and walking back.

"Don't be in such a rush to leave." Ning Ning thought that the way he was right now was too weird. She wrenched her arm back. "It's already this late, let's have dinner before we go back."

Li Shan Zhu who was walking in front of her stopped in his tracks. He slowly turned his head back, his gaze darkened. He tried very hard to squeeze out his usual simple and pure smile. "Didn't you say you want to try my cooking? Come back with me, I'll cook for you."

Li Shan Zhu was very skilled.

Not long after the two of them had returned home, the aroma of fish head casserole¹ drifted out from the kitchen along with Li Shan Zhu's question, "How much chilli do you want?"

"...Any amount will do." Ning Ning answered casually.

Chopping sounds rang out rapidly. The absolutely normal vegetable chopping sounds—at this time, in this place—made Ning Ning's hair stand on their end for some reason.

When the final dish—the fish head casserole—was placed on the table, Ning Ning scanned the six dishes and one soup on the table, then looked up at Li Shan Zhu who was sitting across from her.

He was wearing a floral apron, it made him look a little cute. He used chopsticks to grab a piece of the snow-white fish and placed it by Ning Ning's mouth. "Big Sister Little Ai, have a taste of my cooking."

Although Ning Ning had a feeling long beforehand, once her stomach started to hurt, she was surprised and furious.

"...Why did you do this?" She held her stomach, she was in so much pain that she broke out in cold sweat. "Why did you poison the food?"

"Because I know." Li Shan Zhu slowly walked over, using a napkin to carefully wipe the sweat on her face. "No matter how good my food is, you will never agree to be my girlfriend."

Ning Ning started to cough up blood.

"Sorry, sorry." Li Shan Zhu used a napkin to wipe the blood by her lips, smiling blissfully. "I'll eat too, I will join you very soon."

"You, you don't have to accompany..." Ning Ning coughed up another pool of blood. "I am actually a transmigrator..."

Collapse of character designation, back to the beginning.

She walked out of the psychological clinic again, she was brought home by Li Shan Zhu again, the fish head casserole was placed on the table again.

Ning Ning sighed. She did not eat the fish he was holding in front of her, she told him gently instead, "I'll be your girlfriend."

The chopsticks shuddered, the fish that it was holding fell off.

Ning Ning got up and walked towards him, gently holding him in her arms.

"Actually, even if you were to feed me spicy strips² for this meal, I would've also agreed to be your girlfriend." She said with tender affection, "What's important is not what I'm eating, it's the person who cooks for me. Do you understand what I mean?"

"...Big Sister Little Ai." Li Shan Zhu buried his face on her shoulder

as he gently called out.

Something was lodged into Ning Ning's stomach, then it was quickly dislodged.

Ning Ning looked down and saw that her stomach was like a running tap, blood was gushing out continuously. Li Shan Zhu held the bloodstained knife, standing silently across from her, the white floral apron was dyed red by her fresh blood.

"Why...do you want to kill me?" Ning Ning asked him in disbelief, "I have agreed...to be your girlfriend."

"Because I know that you are lying to me." Li Shan Zhu looked at her gently with grief, "Just like how you've lied to my brother, lied to Big Brother Hai, lied to Little Ke..."

He turned the knife around and plunged it into his stomach. He didn't pull it out, opening his arms and hugging Ning Ning instead. The knife handle was up against Ning Ning's stomach, the blade digging deeper into Li Shan Zhu's stomach.

"But even so, I still want to be lied to." Li Shan Zhu hugged Ning Ning tightly, crying and sobbing, "Tell me you like me. I beg you, Big Sister Little Ai, lie to me..."

"...You unruly citizens want to bring harm to the sovereign!"

Collapse of character designation, back to the beginning.

Ning Ning walked out of the psychological clinic. This time, Ning Ning absolutely refused to leave with Li Shan Zhu.

"I'm still feeling a little unwell." Ning Ning maintained a distance from him cautiously. "I just got off a call with the doctor, he told me to go back to the hospital for a re-examination."

Li Shan Zhu looked down in disappointment, his slightly long fringe covered up his expression. "...I see."

"Sorry." Ning Ning looked down at her watch and feigned anxiousness. "It's almost the appointed time, I'll make a move."

She had only taken a few steps before a figure rushed out behind her and ferociously hugged her. Both of them fell head first onto the road, directly to the front of a bus that was zooming down the straight...

"The heart has stopped."

"Prepare the defibrillator. Charge, 200 joules."

"Ok, clear!"

Ning Ning slowly opened her eyes, a light shook in front of her eyes and made her giddy, it took a very long while before she asked feebly, "What time is it?"

The doctor and nurses continued to work. One of the nurses answered her, "You will be fine, don't worry."

"What...time is it?" Ning Ning asked again, "Has the weekend passed?"

"Not yet." The nurse said, "It's Saturday night, it's almost eight."

This answer seemed to have sucked out all the strength from Ning Ning, her vision turned blurry again.

She was still alive. What about Li Shan Zhu? Not only had the two of them flown out when they were hit by the bus, they had also been crushed under another car. At that moment, Ning Ning felt like a piece of meat on a chopping block, turning into minced meat at an extremely slow speed.

"Not good, her heart stopped again."

"Let me see..."

Not only did her vision turn blurry, the doctor's voice was getting further and further away.

What a joke, how could she die this day? How could she die before the weekend? Ning Ning struggled to open her mouth and told the doctor and nurses beside her, "I am not Zhang Xin Ai, I am Ning Ning..."

Collapse of character designation, back to the beginning.

Negotiations over and over again, deaths over and over again. Once, in the midst of all this, Ning Ning took the opportunity to call the police while he was cooking in the kitchen. When the police had arrived, before Ning Ning could open the door, Li Shan Zhu had already ignited a gas tank in the kitchen.

That time, Ning Ning almost died.

After relying on "Trump for 2017" to save herself, Ning Ning held a fruit knife, staring at Li Shan Zhu who was standing in front of her.

Li Shan Zhu brought the fish head casserole out from the kitchen and was stunned. He asked with a smile, "Big Sister Little Ai, you want to kill me?"

He gently placed the fish head casserole on the table, making a gentle and crisp sound. For some reason, this crisp sound reminded Ning Ning of the moment the gas tank exploded in the kitchen previously. She shouted as she raised the knife in her hand, aiming the fruit knife at Li Shan Zhu.

"...Big Sister Little Ai." Li Shan Zhu walked towards her after a moment of silence. "Your hand is trembling very badly."

"Don't come over!" Ning Ning shouted lightly, the hand holding the fruit knife was shivering.

Was this terror, fear, or hesitation?

"...Do I have no choice?" She did not know whether she was asking him or herself, "Will I die if I don't kill you?"

But who was she to murder someone in Zhang Xin Ai's stead?

"...Can't you just give up?" Ning Ning had already forgotten how many times she had asked that question, she used an even more gentle, pitiful and pleading tone than before, "Must you kill me?"

"Other than death..." Li Shan Zhu slowly took out a kitchen knife as he smiled at her. "There are no other ways for us to be together."

Saturday, 17th July 2004. In a certain psychological clinic.

Wen Yu placed two teacups on the table. He took a glance at Ning Ning's pocket. "Are you not answering that?"

From when she first sat down, her phone in the pocket of her blouse had been ringing non-stop. She did not silence it, but she did not answer either. She only remained seated in a daze, until a staff member knocked on the door with an electric kettle in hand. "Doctor Wen, the tea is ready."

Wen Yu poured the tea into the cup in front of her.

The fragrance of the tea billowed out, the golden petals on the surface were swirling.

"Three hundred and sixty-two."

What? Wen Yu looked up at Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked down at the tea cup in front of her with a stupefied expression, "This is the three hundred and sixty second cup of chrysanthemum tea I am having here."

Anything that was repeated for too long would make a person feel fed up, numb, manic, and broken down, they would then either

explode or die at last.

Ning Ning slowly picked up the cup of chrysanthemum tea. She did not drink it. With just a whiff of its smell, she turned around and gagged.

With such a violent reaction, it made Wen Yu suspect that his tea was poisoned, or that she might be allergic to chrysanthemum.

"Little Zhang, Little Zhang, come over for a moment." He anxiously called the staff member over, taking the teapot and teacups on the table and leaving. He then opened the window to air the room.

It took ten minutes before Ning Ning got her breath back.

"Are you alright?" Wen Yu asked her from the side, he had an expression of care and doubt.

He carefully thought back on it after the incident, that scene on the roof was most likely an act, what about now? Was she acting again? Was she pretending to be sick to gain his pity?

Ning Ning laid on the armrest of the sofa. She slowly looked up at him with a very weird expression, it was that of pain and guilt, it even had a sentiment that was hard to describe with words, a feeling akin to that of a flower under a rock breaking through the earth—minute, obscure, abrupt, and full of struggles.

"A day like this, I couldn't even go through a single one." She looked at Wen Yu with a dazed expression. "How...has he endured for twenty-seven years?"

The camera shot slowly got further away.

Within Life Theater, her dazed expression was projected on the big screen, reflected in the eyes of the only audience.

Shi Zhong Tang sat on the audience seat. The jade mask covered his facial features along with the expression he was making at this time, the only thing that could be seen was his mask that was illuminated by the white light from the screen.

And by his side was darkness, a mess.

He was sitting on a carved chair, it was probably the only chair that was intact in Life Theater—all the other chairs were broken and strewn on the floor. The place was as messy as a junkyard, the originally old and broken down movie theater was even more dilapidated now.

Shouting sounds, sounds of rods hitting each other, undulated

crying sounds—but Shi Zhong Tang did not care, he was completely mesmerised by the person in the movie. He watched the screen without moving, awaiting her next line.

"Twenty-seven years? Who are you talking about?"

"Your brother, Shi Zhong Tang."

1Fish head casserole is a seafood dish from China. It is named for its main ingredient, fish heads, which are cooked in a casserole.

2Latiao (Spicy strip) is a popular Chinese snack. The main raw materials are wheat flour and chili. After adding water, salt, sugar, natural pigment and other surface, the flour is extruded under high temperature, then mixed with chili and other seasonings.

TN: Happy New Year everyone, here's hoping 2021 will be a better year to everyone =)

Chapter 122

122: A Solo Performance

The office quietened down. One of them had not expected herself to utter the name, the other had not expected that the other would utter that name.

Rage swelled up in his chest, but it was then forcibly suppressed. Wen Yu said blandly, "My brother had passed away long ago. How old were you then?"

Don't act like you know him very well.

Ning Ning, on the other hand, looked like she was out of it. She looked at her surroundings, she looked at the phone that was ringing non-stop, her expression was weird, she mumbled to herself, "Why am I still here?"

Wen Yu was bewildered.

"Why have I not returned to the beginning?" Ning Ning thought about it, her gaze fixed itself on Wen Yu's face. "Ah, I know. Are you pitying me? Are you thinking that I am sick?"

Wen Yu indeed thought that she was sick.

Exhaustion, restlessness, sometimes dazed, sometimes awake, she even had the tendency to talk to herself, losing her ability to express herself; they had only parted ways for one day, how did her mental state deteriorate this much?

Ning Ning, however, was excited. After drinking the same chrysanthemum tea three hundred and sixty-two times, repeating the same conversation three hundred and sixty-two times, even a little deviation was enough to get her excited.

She adjusted her sitting posture and leaned slightly forward, her eyes sparkling as she looked at Wen Yu. "Your brother passed away in the year 1990. At that time, I was twenty-two years old."

"But you are only twenty-five years old this year." Wen Yu said blandly.

"I acted in an ancient period drama with your brother." Ning Ning's eyes showed the glow of someone who was reminiscing the past. "Out

of everyone I've met in my life, he was the...best actor."

"My brother had only acted in one movie that year..." Wen Yu wanted to remind her that she hadn't been involved in that movie.

"I know," Ning Ning smiled, "<<The Person Within the Painting>>."

Wen Yu suddenly stopped speaking, the woman in front of him felt very unfamiliar.

The way she smiled, the familiar way she was talking about Shi Zhong Tang, the shyness when she looked down and smiled, the way she pulled her hair behind her ear—none of them looked like Zhang Xin Ai, but another person.

"Who are you?" Wen Yu asked abruptly.

"I am..." Ning Ning smiled. "Princess Ling Shan."

Female lead character from <<The Person Within the Painting>>, Princess Ling Shan.

...Delusional disorder? Dissociative identity disorder? If it was the latter, why would she refer to herself as Princess Ling Shan, a female lead character from a movie? Or maybe she was pretending to be sick again, just like how she had been on the roof? Wen Yu decided to probe a little.

"How should I address you?" Wen Yu asked, "Your Highness?"

Ning Ning sniggered as if she was amused by what he said. "Ling Shan will do."

This was not the reaction Princess Ling Shan should have. Princess Ling Shan from <<The Person Within the Painting>> was lofty and proud. She might be able to endure having the commoners talk behind her back, but she would be unable to endure commoners addressing her by her maiden name, only the people closest to her—for example, her lover Shi Zhong Tang—could address her intimately: Ling Shan.

"Ling Shan." Wen Yu called out, going along with her, "Can you tell me how you got to know my brother?"

"I got to know him while acting." Ning Ning smiled. "It's a funny story, the first words he ever said to me were actually: 'I fell down, I can only get up with a kiss'."

"Then he must have really liked you." Wen Yu smiled too. "He very rarely said such things when he first met a girl."

"I thought he was a natural playboy, one who would lay his hands on every woman." Ning Ning laughed out loud.

If the familiarity between two people were one-sided, then the topic would end as soon as it started; but ten minutes passed by, twenty minutes passed by, they were still talking about Shi Zhong Tang.

"What's the matter?" Ning Ning suddenly asked Wen Yu as she stared at him, "You're sweating a lot."

"It's a little warm." Wen Yu got up and closed the window, then raised the remote in his hand. The air conditioner switched on with a beep. He had his back to Ning Ning as he acted casual while asking, "That's right, since the two of you acted together for so long, what was your favourite scene?"

He turned back, then he became slightly stunned.

Ning Ning had changed her sitting posture without him noticing. She was sitting in an extremely dignified and noble manner on the sofa, gesturing at him and ordering him as if it was a natural thing to do. "Come here."

Her hand that was doing the gesture froze in mid-air for a moment. All of a sudden, she sprang up from the sofa with a surprised look on her face, it was as if she had not stood up on her own will, but had been yanked off the sofa by an invisible person instead. She spun one round on the spot as if she was dancing, then frowned and pushed the air. It looked like she was forcefully pushing a man who had been rude to her.

She used too much force that she herself took half a step back, her butt were planted on the sofa. Very quickly, she went from sitting to lying down, holding her head up with one hand as she was half reclined on the sofa, lazily uttering, "Li Lang, we should spend some time apart from each other."

Someone said something to her. She listened for a moment before she slowly opened her eyes and looked at the wall across from her. "...It's just that I think you are too engrossed. In the end, I'm the same as them, just another painting."

She looked so serious that Wen Yu, who was only a bystander, could not help but look along with her. Yet, the wall was empty. Besides an air-conditioner that was blowing cold air, there was nothing else. After a moment, Ning Ning's voice rang out behind him, the speed of her speech was quicker than before, "...You still don't get it. The two of us are separated by yin and yang. You are of the living,

I am of the dead, how could we be tog..."

Her voice stopped abruptly.

Wen Yu turned back and saw her fingernails digging into the sofa, her torso leaning forward unnaturally, as if she had been pulled into the embrace of an invisible man who was whispering gently into her ear, "I've caught you, I'm never letting go."

"... Let go!" Ning Ning struggled with all her strength to break free from his embrace. She almost rolled her entire body off the sofa, scrambling towards the direction of the study table, a shoe even fell off as she was running. She did not care to pick it up, she only took one look back in a rush, the fear and disgust in her eyes gave Wen Yu chills.

Cold air came out of the air-conditioner, swirling around him. He almost thought that it had brought him back in time, back to the set of < <The Person Within the Painting> > in 1990.

No, what had sent him back was not time, it was the woman in front of him instead.

She alone had re-enacted the entirety of < <The Person Within the Painting> > !

The almost eerie lifelike acting skills had even turned the white floor tiles into golden sand, the cold air from the air-conditioner into waves of heat from the desert, stirring the sandy ground, creating golden waves.

The bohemian dress on her had lost its colour amidst the hot wind, gradually turning into a plain, pure, white clothing. Ning Ning knelt down on the sand in her white clothes, holding an invisible man in her embrace. She hastily opened a bottle and poured the resurrection medicine into the other party's mouth. She waited for a moment before she said with a trembling voice, "Why is he not waking up?"

The answer she got made her lose her mind. She abruptly drew a sword as she got up, stabbing the other party to death with one fell swoop, then she slowly turned over and bent down, her fingers caressing an invisible face gently. "How strange, I used to feel annoyed whenever I see your face, but now..."

Tears welled up in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

Ning Ning wiped the tears on her face. She lifted the sword in her hand like a demon, it was suddenly in a horizontal position as she slashed her neck—

"How can this be?" She touched her uninjured neck, she could not help but laugh at such a ridiculous event, but her laughter soon turned into tears.

She tossed the sword from her hand and scrambled back to her original spot. She sought warmth from an invisible person by bringing him into her embrace, crying as she said, "Li Lang, I'm scared. I'm not scared of death, I'm scared of living..."

< <The Person Within the Painting> > should have ended at this point, but she cried harder and harder, hugging the person tighter and tighter, as if she would not bear to live anymore if she were to let go, crying out like she had broken down, "I'm so scared, I'm so scared !! I don't want to die again, *sob, sob*...I don't want to live either, I don't want to live endlessly like this any longer!!"

"Please don't cry."

Within Life Theater, Shi Zhong Tang reached out with both his hands, attempting to hug Ning Ning who was on the screen, "This movie is very easy, I'll teach you..."

His outstretched hands were blocked off by the ice cold screen, he could only watch as another pair of hands reached out in his place, hugging the person within the painting that he could see but not touch.

"Don't cry." Wen Yu gently hugged Ning Ning.

Ning Ning had forgotten that she was crying as she froze in his arms.

He helped Ning Ning over to the sofa and sat her down, a pair of clear eyes sizing her up meticulously.

Ning Ning was getting goosebumps from the way he was looking at her. What happened? Why was he looking at her in such a favourable way?

"What are you looking at?" She touched her face, her eyes had a trace of caution and alienation. "Don't you hate me the most?"

"Zhang Xin Ai is the one I hate, not you." Wen Yu said gently, "You're Ling Shan, aren't you?"

A different name, a different personality, even the acting skill was of a different level—even though both of them could act, it was the difference between a common person and a movie empress.

The one who was in front of him might be Zhang Xin Ai's second

personality. Two personalities occupying the same body. The two of them might have interacted, or they might have never interacted, but they could be seen as two independent people. Because they took turns using this body, so one of them would sometimes notice things the other would not.

"You mentioned death repeatedly just now." Wen Yu gave her a cup of water. "Do you think that someone is trying to hurt you?"

Ning Ning drank the water slowly. Once it reached her stomach, she was able to calm down a little.

Without answering Wen Yu's question, she took out her phone and pressed the answer button.

Crying rang out from the other side. Ning Ning repeated what she had said stiffly, "Stop crying, I can't even make out what you are saying anymore."

"You wouldn't answer my calls. I thought you were going to ignore me forever."

"Didn't I tell you yesterday? I wasn't feeling well, I had to have a minor surgery at the hospital."

"Then why didn't you tell me which hospital you were at? Why didn't you let me visit you?"

"Stable Psychological Clinic." Ning Ning told him the name of the clinic Wen Yu worked at.

The other party fell silent for a moment before he used a calm tone to ask, "Wen Yu's place?"

"Yes, at Wen Yu's place."

"..I'll come over and fetch you right now."

After she hung up, Ning Ning's hand fell limply. She had a numb expression on her face, not saying a word. From Wen Yu's point of view, her expression was that of a person who was simply waiting for death.

...Who was she on the phone with? Who made her react like that?

That person appeared soon after.

"Doctor Wen, hello." A slightly bashful university student pushed the door and entered. "I am here for my big sister."

He walked over and held Ning Ning's hand. Ning Ning reacted fiercely as she swatted his hand away. He was stunned for a moment,

malevolence flashed across his eyes for an instant.

That instance of malevolence did not escape Wen Yu's eyes.

Just as Li Shan Zhu forcefully held Ning Ning's hand, interlocking his fingers with hers while he dragged her away, a voice rang out from behind, "Hold on."

Both Li Shan Zhu and Ning Ning looked back at the same time.

They saw Wen Yu pull open a drawer and take out a car key. He said to them, "I'll drive both of you back."

Chapter 123

123: Black Photo Frame

Although Li Shan Zhu had turned it down multiple times, Wen Yu insisted on sending the two of them home.

Why? Ning Ning stared at the side of his face. Did he think that she was sick which was why he couldn't just leave her alone? Just like that time on the roof?

"We're here." Li Shan Zhu took a key out.

Ning Ning looked over, the door in front of her eyes slowly opened.

It opened for the three hundred sixty-third time.

Wen Yu looked away. The moment the door opened, Ning Ning held onto his sleeve, showing a subconscious reliance.

"Since you're already here," Li Shan Zhu said with his back towards them, "let's eat together."

He walked into the kitchen. There was the sound of the stove being turned on, the sound of vegetables being chopped, the aroma of a fish head casserole.

Wen Yu sat on the sofa for a while before his right hand was abruptly turned over by someone. His palm felt itchy. He looked down and saw that Ning Ning was writing on his palm with her finger.

Two words.

"Don't eat."

Wen Yu read out the two words. Ning Ning placed the finger that she used to write in front of her lips and made a shushing gesture at him, then looked towards the kitchen.

"...Why?" Wen Yu stared at her for a while. "What happened to your voice?"

Ning Ning looked at him without saying a word.

It was not that she did not want to speak.

It was that she could not say a word.

She had been on the verge of death three hundred and sixty-two

times, she had failed a total of three hundred and sixty-two times. Every time she failed, she would go back to the beginning, then accept the same punishment—line reduction.

The door to Li Shan Zhu's house seemed to have become the key point, her lines started to count the moment she entered the door, it didn't matter that she had been laughing and talking to Wen Yu previously, now she could not utter a single word. Not to mention talking, if she even exclaimed an onomatopoeia, she would immediately be sent back to the beginning.

To summarise, from now on, the amount of lines she could say was: zero.

All of her thoughts could only be portrayed in writing or gestures.

Trying to explain to Wen Yu was simply too difficult, so Ning Ning could only touch her throat and shook his head at him.

"Your throat is not well?" Wen Yu asked.

Ning Ning nodded.

"Should I buy medicine for you?" Wen Yu asked.

Ning Ning shook her head.

At this moment, Li Shan Zhu brought out the fish head casserole from the kitchen. Upon seeing the bright red chillies floating on the surface of the broth, Wen Yu said to Li Shan Zhu, "Her throat is not well, she might not be able to eat this."

"Then you can have it." Li Shan Zhu smiled at him.

Wen Yu was a very polite person, even if Bear Grylls¹ were to serve him food with eight legs or four heads, he would at least taste it to show respect for the host. However, he rubbed his palm with his finger. The two words, "don't eat", seemed to have the residual heat of Ning Ning's finger. He hesitated for a moment before he told Li Shan Zhu, "Sorry, I can't really take spicy food."

"This chilli is not spicy, give it a try if you don't believe me." Li Shan Zhu filled a bowl of fish broth and fish for him, a pair of red wooden chopsticks was laid neatly on the black wooden bowl.

It was hard to turn down such kindness. Just as Wen Yu was about to reach out and take the bowl, a hand reached out from his side and grabbed the pair of chopsticks that were placed on it.

"Big Sister Little Ai," Li Shan Zhu exclaimed, "is your throat fine now? Can you eat spicy food?"

Ning Ning picked up a piece of the snow-white fish, the chopsticks paused mid-air before it was suddenly shoved in his direction.

Time seemed to have frozen at this moment, frozen on the piece of piping hot fish. The heat gradually dissipated, a drop of broth rolled off the fish and dripped onto the floor, leaving behind a hard-to-wash-off oily stain.

Li Shan Zhu slowly started to crack a smile, opening his mouth to reveal his pearly white teeth. He got close to Ning Ning's hand and bit down on the fish.

Ning Ning was so shocked that her hand trembled, one of the chopsticks fell to the floor, Li Shan Zhu bent down to pick it up.

"Big Sister Little Ai is really like a little kid sometimes, she can't even hold her chopsticks properly." He returned to the kitchen and came out with a new pair of chopsticks. "Here, hold this, don't drop it this time."

Ning Ning stared at him. She suspected that he did not go back to the kitchen to take a pair of chopsticks, but to take the opportunity to spit out the fish in his mouth.

Li Shan Zhu seemed to be a little embarrassed to be stared at by her for so long, he smiled bashfully again. Ning Ning laughed coldly in her heart in response, she thought to herself, "You smile. No matter how nice it is, your smiles hide a dagger, I will not fall for it, neither will Wen—oh my God, what are you doing?"

Ning Ning almost screamed, because Wen Yu took the chopsticks that Li Shan Zhu had handed to him, grabbed a piece of fish and chewed a few times. His Adam's apple bobbed, the fish went into his stomach. He abruptly covered his mouth and coughed a few times.

The colour on Ning Ning's face changed drastically. Just as she was about to shout "Trump for 2017", Wen Yu put his hand down and told her, "It's not bad, just a little spicy. *Cough, cough*. You can try it if you can eat spicy food."

Ning Ning, "..."

Through the entire three hundred sixty-three iterations, this was the second time she touched the fish head casserole with her chopsticks. To be fair, it was indeed not bad. Li Shan Zhu might not be good enough to cook for a hotel, but he would have no problem walking into a local restaurant as a head chef.

But why? He had poisoned the fish for the previous few hundred

times, why did he not do it this time? Did he poison the other dishes?

"Why are you only eating this?" Li Shan Zhu took a bite out of every dish in front of her, smiling. "Look, there's no poison."

The air seemed to have frozen, the silence around the dining table was deafening.

"I'm sorry." Li Shan Zhu slowly turned his head to look at Wen Yu, he sighed again. "Something happened recently that caused Big Sister Little Ai to think that there is someone constantly trying to get her, what is the medical term for this? Persecutory delusion."

That's not it! Ning Ning wanted to explain, but she could not speak, she could only shake her head repeatedly at Wen Yu.

"Just like right now." Li Shan Zhu shifted his vision towards her, saying with a tone of someone who was mocking himself while nursing a grievance at the same time, "Do you think that the food was poisoned? Do you think that I want to harm you? How could I do such a thing?"

Ning Ning trembled with anger, he actually put the blame on her. Clearly, he had already murdered her three hundred sixty-two times, this time was no exception, he just chose a method other than poison.

What was important was what Wen Yu pondered on it. She sneaked a glance at him and saw that his attention was neither on her nor Li Shan Zhu, he was looking at the corner of the room—what was in the corner of the room?

Ning Ning followed his vision. She saw that there was a small cabinet at the corner. There was a bonsai plant that was growing healthily on it, beside the bonsai plant was a photo frame, within the photo frame was three people—no, one of the faces was blotted out, there were only two people left.

With a bang, the photo frame was flipped down.

Ning Ning did not even see who was the person who had been blotted out.

The hand that flipped down the photo frame belonged to Li Shan Zhu, his face looked a little gloomy. After he kept the photo frame, his face turned bashful again.

"That might have been done by the neighbour's kid." He closed his eyes. "Naughty kids like to draw on anything. My brother likes children, so he wouldn't reprimand them even if he were to see it."

"Your brother?" Wen Yu asked.

"I didn't tell you?" Li Shan Zhu smiled. "Big Sister Little Ai is my brother's fiancée. Before my brother left, he told me that I have to take good care of her."

"Where did your brother go?"

"He had an aircraft accident... "

"My condolences."

Li Shan Zhu's phone suddenly rang. He frantically avoided the two of them as he answered the phone outside. During the time that he left, Wen Yu asked Ning Ning abruptly, "Did that really happen to his brother?"

Ning Ning was surprised. She did not know why Wen Yu asked that, but she still nodded her head.

"Is that so?" Wen Yu furrowed his brows. She did not know why he was thinking of those things. He then pursued the matter further. "Is this his brother's house, or his house?"

Ning Ning could not speak, she could only pull his hand over and quickly wrote on his palm, "Both."

"This house belongs to both of them?" Wen Yu asked.

Ning Ning nodded.

"What are the two of you doing?" Li Shan Zhu's voice suddenly rang out from the side. The two of them looked over and saw that he was staring directly at them, at the hands that were being used as pen and paper respectively.

Although the two of them knew they were communicating with each other, from an outsider's point of view, this type of communication was too unnecessarily intimate—especially when one of the party was Zhang Xin Ai. She used a finger that had pink nail polish to draw in the palm of a young man, this gesture showed some intimacy no matter how you looked at it.

Li Shan Zhu's expression was even more gloomy, he said coldly, "This is my brother's house, he's watching you two."

"Your brother..." Wen Yu muttered, "might really be watching us."

Ning Ning looked at him in surprise. What did he mean by that?

A shadow loomed on the side of her face, it was in the shape of a knife. Ning Ning looked over. Reflected in her eyes was Li Shan Zhu

with a knife raised up high, the knife that had stabbed her fifty times.

After fighting with him for at least a hundred times, even if Ning Ning failed as a fighter, she could still pass as an escapee. She immediately threw whatever was near her hand at him, then continued to throw things as she ran. When she reached the door, she realised that he was not chasing him. She looked back and saw Wen Yu holding up a chair as a shield to confront him.

Li Shan Zhu's knife came down and got stuck in the chair. Wen Yu tripped him with his leg, then...then Li Shan Zhu did not have the chance to get up anymore.

Wen Yu pinned Li Shan Zhu's arms behind his back and placed his knee on Li Shan Zhu's waist, looking up at Ning Ning and said, "Call the police."

Ning Ning, "..."

Seeing that she still could not speak, Wen Yu sighed. "Come over and give me a hand, my phone is in my pocket."

That was when Ning Ning walked over. She reached out and felt around his waist pockets for a moment. She took out his phone and dialled the police before holding it up to his ear. Once the call connected, Wen Yu told the police the current situation. Not long after, the police arrived and brought everyone away.

After they walked out of the room, Ning Ning was still a little absent-minded. She could not help but stop in her tracks and looked back at the door. She blurted out, "I'm out?"

"Why would you not be?" Wen Yu felt his chest become stuffy as he stumbled back a few steps. He looked down and saw that Ning Ning had buried her face on his chest. Her shoulders were trembling uncontrollably as she held his waist tightly with both her arms.

The police in front of them turned back and took a look, he gave him a thumbs up. "Not bad, young man. Saving a damsel in distress, you would definitely be rewarded."

"I have never wanted any rewards..." Wen Yu explained frantically, he felt embarrassed being hugged in public. He frantically told Ning Ning in a quiet voice, "Quickly let go."

He did not understand why Ning Ning was so agitated, only Ning Ning knew why.

She had come out.

Come out of the infinite loop.

The time now was two in the afternoon, she only had to hold out for a few more hours before she could leave the movie, to return to the safe, peaceful and eternally conventional world that would, at the very least, not loop.

"Thank you." Ning Ning choked. "Thank you, Wen Yu."

"...No need to thank me." Wen Yu pried her arms open forcefully. "I would help anyone who was in that situation."

Her passion made him a little scared. After he broke free of her, Wen Yu immediately maintained a distance from her, the two of them did not even exchange a word afterwards.

Ning Ning's entire body relaxed as she watched the sun gradually set. She was about to give Wen Yu a call to buy him dinner, but after feeling around for a moment, she could not find her phone.

"Where's my phone?" Ning Ning returned to the police station, her phone wasn't there. A policeman reminded her, "I didn't see you bring your phone here, could you have left it at the house?"

Ning Ning was taken aback. At the house, Li Shan Zhu's house?

She couldn't lose her phone, her phone was her only means to contact anyone. What was most important was that her phone was in her purse. Her money, her cards, along with the keys to her house were all inside the purse. Without the purse, she wouldn't even have a place to stay for the night.

Ning Ning could only return. The door was already locked. Luckily, the landlord was present when the police came to arrest Li Shan Zhu, he had seen Ning Ning with them. Upon hearing that she left something inside, he happily unlocked the door and let her go in to take a look.

Because of the fight before, the living room was in a mess. The fish head casserole along with the other dishes on the table had all ended up on the floor. After a period of time, the broth had already coagulated on the floor, giving off a terrible smell, there were a few blowflies circling and buzzing above it.

Ning Ning furrowed her brows. She tried her best to avoid the pile of leftovers, rummaging through the living room, but she still could not find her phone, she found a photo frame instead.

It was the photo frame that Li Shan Zhu had forcefully flipped down before.

The photo frame had fallen off the cabinet due to the fight from before, Ning Ning picked it off the floor and flipped it over, only to discover that there was a crack on the glass, but the photo within remained clear as day...the person that had been blotted out was also clear as day.

"...Why is it me?" Ning Ning widened her eyes in surprise.

There were three people in the photo frame—Li Shan Zhu, a man who looked a lot like him, and Zhang Xin Ai.

The three of them looked like they had a very good relationship, they had their arms around each other's shoulders. The two brothers stood on each side, Zhang Xin Ai stood in the middle, her signature wavy hair draped over her. Coincidentally, she was wearing the same bohemian dress Ning Ning had on at the moment.

It was just that her face had been blotted out. Someone had blotted it out by drawing circles with a pen—up and down, left and right, they were drawn in all directions. It was drawn so forcefully that it left an indentation on the photo, a spine chilling emotion emitted from the strokes.

This was a little surprising to Ning Ning. She had thought that with Li Shan Zhu's condition, he would have wanted his brother to disappear first, not her.

"Ring, ring, ring!"

A phone suddenly rang. It gave Ning Ning a fright, the photo frame fell out of her hands onto the floor again. She frantically picked it up then walked towards the direction of the ring.

"Hello." She found her phone then answered it.

"You went back there?" Wen Yu's voice rang out from the other side.

"Yes, I left my phone and money here." Ning Ning answered, "That's right, are you free tonight? You've been a big help, let me treat you to a meal?"

"No need for a meal, get out of there quickly." Wen Yu said, his voice had a trace of haste. "That place did not only have Li Shan Zhu."

"...What do you mean?" Ning Ning asked.

"That is not a bachelor pad," Wen Yu said, "at least two men live there."

Ning Ning was stunned.

Wen Yu's voice rang out by her ear continuously. She stood alone in the middle of the living room, beside her was a waste basket, it had quite the amount of cigarettes in it. One of them was very fresh, as if it had just been thrown in, you could vaguely see an ember that had not gone out.

"Clack, clack, clack."

Someone had opened the fridge door and left it open. There was so much emergency food, there was no way a person could finish it alone. On top of that, there was a pile of instant noodle boxes, enough to guarantee that if one were to live here, that person would not need to go out for a very long time.

"Clack, clack, clack."

There were clothes out to dry at the balcony—that was strange, there were actually clothes of two sizes, did Li Shan Zhu buy the wrong size?

"Clack, clack, clack."

From a while ago, someone's footsteps had been ringing out behind her, it got closer and closer to her.

Ning Ning slowly turned her head around.

An unfamiliar man stood behind her.

No, he was not unfamiliar.

Ning Ning took a glimpse of the photo frame in her hand, he looked exactly like the man in it.

"Hello? Hello? Are you still there?" Wen Yu asked.

Wen Yu was standing at the entrance of the police station, the sky was very dark, there were not many people nearby, but there was a dog that was barking non-stop, maybe it was a police dog that had smelled a stranger.

There was no answer for a very long time. Wen Yu stared at his phone, just when he suspected that his phone had problems, Ning Ning's voice rang out from the other end.

"Wen Yu, you were right." She murmured, "His brother...was really watching us."

With a click, the call disconnected.

1Edward Michael "Bear" Grylls is a British adventurer, writer, television presenter and businessman. Grylls first drew attention after

embarking on a number of adventures, and then became widely known for his television series *Man vs. Wild*.

Chapter 124

124: Big Brother's Lover

When Wen Yu arrived at Li Shan Zhu's house, it was empty, Ning Ning was nowhere to be seen.

The landlord said after helping him open the door, "I told you, she had already left with him."

"Whom did she leave with?" Wen Yu asked.

"There." The landlord looked down at the photo frame which had a crack on it. "It was this person."

The photo frame with three people, a face that was blotted out, Wen Yu picked it up from the floor, asking, "What's this person's name? What's his relationship with Li Shan Zhu? "

"I don't know." The landlord shook their head. "Li Shan Zhu was the one who rented the place, he has rented it for about half a year I think, he rarely stays here, but..."

"But what?" Wen Yu asked.

"But every time he comes over, he would bring two big bags of trash down." The landlord looked at the photo frame in his hand. "So I asked him, ' You don't even live here, where does all this rubbish come from?' He smiled without answering, but I knew...he was keeping someone here."

At the same time, the entrance of a clothing store opened, Ning Ning walked out with a shopping bag.

"Thanks." The man in the photo frame took a brand new peaked cap from Ning Ning and put it on his head. He pressed down the brim of the hat and smiled. "Now I won't be recognized by anyone."

"Shan Shui," Ning Ning asked him, "why did you want to fake your death?"

Li Shan Shui remained silent for a moment before he cracked a lonely smile. "Why else? Debt evasion."

Even if he was quite a famous artist, after meeting a big spender that was Zhang Xin Ai, he was quickly unable to make ends meet. Diamond rings, designer items, five star hotels—her desires were

insatiable. Li Shan Shui's savings dwindled day by day, until in the end, for the sake of saving up for the Hawaii wedding she wanted, he took on a huge debt.

A pedestrian walked by, Li Shan Shui reflexively raised his right arm. Ning Ning saw that there were a lot of injuries on his arm—scars left behind by rods and knives—there were old and new scars, criss-crossing each other. He covered his face with his right arm for a while. It was only after the pedestrian walked past that he gradually put his arm down. He smiled at Ning Ning. "How awkward, I recognised the wrong person."

"Whom did you mistake that person for?" Ning Ning asked, "A creditor?"

"Ah." Li Shan Shui answered ambivalently. "Where should we stay tonight?"

Ning Ning's house was now a murder scene, they could not return to Li Shan Shui's house either. Not long later, a key twisted inside a keyhole, a door slowly opened, the light switched on and illuminated the easel and plaster statues within—the two of them had returned to Li Shan Shui's atelier.

The initial atelier, the last atelier.

Ning Ning looked at the clock on the wall, eleven o'clock.

She looked at Li Shan Shui at her side, he was coughing twice with his back to Ning Ning, he seemed as if he was rubbing something off the corner of his mouth. He then turned his head and smiled at her. "Give me a moment, I'll tidy this place up."

The atelier had a sofa on which a person could sleep, he pulled open a cabinet and grabbed a blanket from within, smiling. "There's only a blanket."

"I'll sleep in the blanket, you can hug me to sleep."

"Haha...alright, but before we sleep, let's eat first."

They did not eat out. The two of them had lunch boxes and beers that were bought from a convenience store. Although they heated the lunch box up in the convenience store, it got slightly cold when it was brought back. The two did not seem to care, they shared the food down to the last bite.

"I'm a little bloated, I don't want to lie down that quickly." Ning Ning touched her stomach.

"Then stand there for a while." Li Shan Shui shifted his sight to the easel. "Shall I draw a portrait of you?"

"Sure." Ning Ning smiled.

Just like countless times before, she became his model, he became her personal artist—as he took a brush and stood in front of the easel.

Ning Ning's phone rang repeatedly in her purse. Li Shan Shui asked, "Are you not taking that?"

"There's no need." Ning Ning glanced at the clock. It would be the weekend in an hour, the time for Zhang Xin Ai's death was arriving soon. Besides Li Shan Shui who was in front of her, she could not think of anyone else who could be the murderer.

After all, he had motive and had put into motion a series of actions.

"The photo frame at home." Ning Ning looked at Li Shan Shui. "The person who blotted my face out wasn't Shan Zhu but you, right?"

"..." Li Shan Shui continued to paint. *Swish, swish, swish, swish, swish, swish*—the sound of the brush on paper. There was only a head on the drawing paper, there was no body, he was forcefully blotting the face out.

"When did you find out about...my dealings with other men?" Ning Ning asked.

Li Shan Shui tore up the drawing paper in front of him, rolled it up in a ball and tossed it aside, then changed it to another piece of paper.

"For the sake of saving up for the Hawaii wedding you wanted, I borrowed money from a lot of people." The brush landed on the paper again, Li Shan Shui said in a seemingly calm manner, "Including Big Brother Hai."

When men got together, they liked to talk about women—especially after drinking, there would be no limits to what they would discuss about. That day, Big Brother Hai got high from drinking, he talked about his new sweetheart—how did he talk about it?

"I recently got off with an actress."

"Oh? Who is it?"

"It's Zhang Xin Ai! Haha, I would not have known if I had not slept with her, she was such a hussy, she almost sucked me dry. I had only wanted to fool around with her for a bit, but now...I'm completely smitten."

"That's really funny, isn't it?" Li Shan Shui laughed behind the easel. "I took up close to five million in debt for you, but you slept with other men while I was going around borrowing money."

He was clearly laughing, but his haggard face made Ning Ning felt some pity. Even so, she was currently portraying Zhang Xin Ai, she could only tell him this as Zhang Xin Ai, "Don't feel that way, I have some money, I'll help you pay off your debt..."

"Enough!!" Li Shan Shui suddenly threw the brush on the floor, shouting at her uncontrollably, "Do you take me for a fool?! When would you ever spend money on someone else? You had always spent them on yourself, you had never cared for me!"

"Aren't I caring now?" Ning Ning shouted back in retaliation, "I told you, I will pay off the debt!"

"Stop joking, five million, can you afford that?"

"Of course...sob."

A blanket was tossed at her from across the room, covering Ning Ning's face. A snow-white blanket, like the cloth used to wrap a corpse. She was pushed down onto the sofa, Li Shan Shui's hands pressed down through the blanket, pressing down on her face. She could not breathe, she could not speak either...

At the same time, within the police station.

"Five million?" Li Shan Zhu cracked a weird smile. "This debt was paid off long ago."

The policeman in front of him was taken aback.

He had finished getting his testimony taken in the afternoon, but not two hours later, a new development came to light. Li Shan Zhu's house seemed to house another person, that person was his brother, a man who could only fake his death after getting into a debt of five million.

He must have hated Zhang Xin Ai a lot. He took on the debt for her, but she cheated on him behind his back instead.

How much did he hate her? There was already evidence for that. The person who called Big Brother Hai and Little Ke, the person who divulged Zhang Xin Ai's secrets was Li Shan Shui. He had been hiding out in the apartment after he had faked his death, he then called every one of Zhang Xin Ai's lovers, instigating them to kill her.

When it came down to it, the source of the hatred was love, and

debt.

"When was it paid off?" The policeman asked, "Who paid it off for him?"

The name everyone least expected came out of Li Shan Zhu's mouth. "Big Sister Little Ai."

"Is that very strange?" He laughed, the more he laughed the more vicious he sounded. "Big Sister Little Ai loves my brother dearly. A thrillseeker like her, she can two-time a father and his son, a boss and his subordinate, a teacher and his student, but she was unwilling to touch me, because I am his brother."

"Brother loved her dearly too. It was not until the moment when I showed him a half naked photo of Big Sister Little Ai taking off her wedding gown—and told him that she was the one who sent it to me—that he believed me... Actually, that photo was one that I secretly took. I lied to him. I told him that Big Sister Little Ai wanted to seduce me, that the two of us siblings were no different to anyone else in her eyes, that we were all prey who provided her with the thrill she sought."

"Actually no such thing happened. She was the same as him, she had been waiting for the wedding for a very long time. He used up all his savings for the wedding, she used up all her savings to pay off his debt..." Li Shan Zhu leaned back on the chair, looking up at the dusky ceiling, his eyes were also dusky. "After he died, she did not call off the wedding, she planned to have the wedding alone in Hawaii. Before that, she even planned to break up with all her lovers. Haha, what a fool..."

The atelier gradually regained its peace, the person under the blanket gradually stopped struggling.

"...I'm a fool." Li Shan Shui slowly removed the blanket. He lowered his head and looked down at his lifeless fiancée, his smile was sweet yet bitter. "Little Ai, do you know why I blotted your portrait out?"

Someone suddenly knocked the door down, Wen Yu and the police rushed in.

"Freeze."

"Call the ambulance quickly!"

Wen Yu stopped in his tracks when he walked past an easel.

It was a half-length portrait of Zhang Xin Ai.

There were a few paper balls that had been tossed to the side. If one were to open them, they would see that they were all portraits of Zhang Xin Ai, blotted out before they were completed. The only one that was not blotted out in time was the half-length portrait in front of him. Although it was just a few strokes of brush outlining the shape, it looked lifelike under the light, it was charming and attractive, every strand of hair seemed to be shining with light, it was as beautiful as the goddess of love.

The artist seemed to be saying with his brush, "My love for you flows through this brush. When I look into your eyes, I want to say I love you. When I hear you speak, I want to forgive you. Only by covering your face with a blanket, not being able to see a thing, not being able to hear a thing, will I be able to steel my heart and kill you..."

Wen Yu's vision shifted away from the portrait and moved onto Li Shan Shui who was opposite of him.

He sat on the sofa in a daze, he did not even react when a policeman walked past him. All he did was to quietly stare at Zhang Xin Ai, his eyes were hollow, there was nothing there.

"She was my (big) brother's lover."

Within the police station, Li Shan Zhu looked at the ceiling with the same hollow expression, muttering, "She came for him, she changed for him, in the end, she died for him. From the beginning till the end, I could not replace my brother."

Within Life Theater, Ning Ning opened her eyes.

...In the past, she had always opened her eyes on a chair, this time she opened her eyes in the midst of ruins.

"What happened?" She looked around her. Before she could stand up from the wreckage, a pair of hands reached out and picked her up from the floor in a rough manner.

A fox mask, long and wavy hair, it was Zhang Xin Ai.

"What are you doing?" A man's palm reach out behind Ning Ning accompanied by a teasing tone. The palm smacked Zhang Xin Ai's hand down while his other hand pulled Ning Ning into his embrace. A man wearing a jade mask gazed at Zhang Xin Ai, the corners of his eyes were like peach blossoms as they usually were. "The movie has already ended."

"No!" Zhang Xin Ai reached out and grabbed Ning Ning's arms.

"After getting murdered three hundred and sixty-two times, why did you not kill Li Shan Zhu a single time! Just once! Once is enough! Shan Shui and I..."

She started crying abruptly. "Would have been saved."

Ning Ning felt chills in her body. So that was it, this was the idea she had. Not saying anything she would not say, not doing anything she would not do—would guarantee that she would walk into Li Shan Zhu's plot to murder her, then die infinitely, repeat infinitely. This repetition would make Ning Ning feel numb, fed up, broken down. Once Ning Ning were to fail to persevere and killed Li Shan Zhu...

Then Li Shan Zhu who was supposed to be alive in the future would die in this movie.

"Even if Li Shan Zhu were to die, the fate of Li Shan Shui and you would not have changed much." Shi Zhong Tang's voice rang out from the side, he said blandly, "No man would be able to endure being made a cuckold that many times. You have been wrong from the beginning. If you want to change the future, the thing you should change the most is yourself..."

He laughed. "But there's no use talking about these things now, you don't have a ticket anymore. As a masked person who has lost the main character ticket which belongs to you, you should know what will happen to you right?"

Chapter 125

125: Mask, Masked Person

What would happen?

Zhang Xin Ai remained silent for a moment before she abruptly took off for the entrance.

Her shoe fell off halfway through. Upon closer inspection however, it was not a shoe, it was her right leg that had fallen off. It had completely fallen off, there was no blood, only strips of black tape leaked out of the part it broke off. She dragged her broken leg as she stumbled, falling to the floor all of a sudden, because her other leg had broken off as well. As with the other leg, black tapes flowed out from the part it broke off from.

"Ah... Help me..." Zhang Xin Ai crawled with her two arms as long tapes dragged behind her. One by one, she crawled past the feet of the masked people before she finally reached the entrance of the theater. She cried out, "Shan Shui..."

Before she could finish, her mask fell off from her face.

A pair of black cloth shoes slowly walked over. Boss Qu bent down and picked up the fox mask.

Zhang Xin Ai was no longer on the floor, there was only a pile of black tapes spinning on the floor like a snake. They twisted and struggled a few times before it turned into ashes, black grains dissipating into the air.

Boss Qu held the mask and walked to the direction of the projector room. The masked people who had just been at odds with him actually put the chairs and stools down as they followed behind him.

They looked like a line of people at a funeral.

Ning Ning doubted and hesitated for a moment before following behind them.

The door to the projector room was open. She did not see any film reels nor videotapes inside. In that projector room of unknown age, there were only endless masks strewn messily on the floor, hung disorderly on the walls; male, female, old, young, crying, smiling, resenting, raging.

"Every masked person has a main character ticket that belongs to them," Boss Qu slowly walked into the projector room as he told Ning Ning with his back to her, "if it's used up, then the movie that belongs to them will stop screening prematurely and get sealed up, it will have to wait for the next available slot for it to air again. But, the number of new masked people who enter this place every year is so many, there are so many of them waiting for their story to get screened, when would there be another empty slot again?"

He hung the fox mask on the wall before he turned his head back and told Ning Ning, "You don't want to become one of them right?"

Ning Ning was standing in the middle of a pile of masks, she had just realised what expression the masked people had when they looked at the projector room.

It was an expression of someone looking at a graveyard.

"Indeed, they are still alive." Boss Qu gave the fox mask a knock, it gave off a crisp sound. He laughed coldly. "They could hear, they could see, they could think, they could feel the changes in time, but they could not speak. They could only wait silently...wait for the day they would become a masked person again."

Being stared at by the masks that enveloped the interior of the room, being stared at by those pairs of eyes that were alive, Ning Ning seemingly could hear their silent cries, "Ah, help me..."

She suddenly felt cold and nauseous. Ning Ning could not help but cover her mouth before she turned around and ran. Behind her, Boss Qu's cold expression turned gentle again, as if to say—go, fear this place, fear me, never return again.

"Huff, huff, huff..." She brushed past the masked people one by one, frantically running on the red carpet in the black passageway. Upon seeing a person leaning on the wall in front of her, she stopped in her tracks.

The entrance was right there, there was a crack in the doorway. A ray of light was shining through the crack, illuminating Shi Zhong Tang's jade mask. The mask had a mild and soft halo of light on it, like sunlight which warmed the jade stone of the indigo mountain, causing thin curls of smoke to rise.¹

He did not go into the projector room, he had been leaning on the wall quietly instead as he waited for her to come out.

"Life Theater gave us a chance to change the past, this is the price we pay." Shi Zhong Tang laughed as he pressed down on his chest.

"Our body had been taken away by the theater."

Ning Ning looked at him as he approached her and brought her into his arms.

"The thing that is hugging you right now, is it actually flesh and blood? Or is it a reel of tape? A series of numbers? Or a ray of light from a projector? Actually, I'm not sure myself." Shi Zhong Tang pressed her head onto his chest. Although he was laughing, his laughter had a trace of frailty. "Listen, is my heart still beating? Tell me, am I still alive?"

Ning Ning tried her best to place her ear as close to his chest as possible.

The theater was dead silent, his chest was dead silent.

"It is..." Ning Ning hugged him tightly, she said quietly, "You are still alive."

"Ah, yes, I am still alive." Shi Zhong Tang seemed to have believed her and cheered up. He rubbed her hair and closed his eyes, "I...want to live."

The poster by the entrance swayed in the wind.

Title: < <Big Brother's Lover> >

Starring: Zhang Xin Ai, Ning Ning

The movie had ended. What the poster looked like before was what the poster looked like now, there was not a trace of change. A few passersby chatted and laughed as they walked past. No one noticed the old poster on the wall, no one noticed the once popular actress on the poster. One of them tossed a beer can behind them, the can fell parabolically and rolled underneath the poster.

The discarded beer can, the discarded actress, both of them were submerged in the river of time as they were forgotten by everyone.

After returning from Life Theater, Ning Ning almost collapsed on the bed as she laid down. She was too tired—not physically tired, she was mentally drained. Acting in the same scene for three hundred and sixty-three times with no breaks in between, by the end, it was not acting anymore, it was torture instead...

She was probably woken up by hunger. She held her stomach that was having spasms as she opened the refrigerator. She took out a tomato and viciously took a bite out of it, the cold flesh went into her stomach. She shivered once then turned around and put the tomato in

a sink, letting water run on it for a while so as to let its temperature return to normal before she ate it bite by bite.

As she was eating the tomato, she charged her phone and switched it on. She had long expected that she would have a ton of missed calls, but what she did not expect was that the one who called her the most was not her manager Li Bo Yue, but Chen Shuang He. That was strange, why was he looking for her? Was he still hung up over going over the script in a hotel room?

Just as she was making blind guesses, her phone rang.

It was Director Chen.

"Hello," Ning Ning answered the call, "Director Chen."

"How is the preparation going?" Director Chen went straight to the point.

Ning Ning swallowed the tomato flesh and answered, "It's almost done."

"Then come over." Director Chen said, "I'm still waiting at the usual place."

After she hung up, Ning Ning opened the refrigerator again. She placed two tomatoes in the sink and turned on the tap, eating the tomatoes bite by bite, finishing all three tomatoes one after another. She slowly breathed out and placed both her hands under the tap, her hands caught the water and splashed it on her face, then she stared at herself in the mirror. "We meet again, Zhang Xin Ai."

Usual place, Director Chen's house.

The same people were there—Director Chen, Li Shan Zhu and Chen Shuang He.

Compared to last time, Chen Shuang He looked at Ning Ning with an even colder expression this time. She didn't know if it was because of the dozens of missed calls, or if it was because she had turned down his request to go over the script in a hotel room...

"Last time you two acted the scene of Little Ai seducing the younger brother in the atelier, let's switch it up this time. Act out the scene of Little Ai seducing the older brother in the atelier." Director Chen turned his head to look at Li Shan Zhu. "What do you think?"

"Let's add a timeframe." Li Shan Zhu crossed his arms, he looked at the two of them from behind his glasses. "The time is after the elder brother discovered that Little Ai had been seducing his younger

brother."

"That wouldn't be considered as acting out an enticement scene then." Director Chen laughed out then told the two of them, "A!"

It was like spring had come overnight, the snow on Chen Shuang He's face melted as he smiled gently at Ning Ning. "You're here, sit."

She had Ning Ning sit down then turned his back to her to start making tea.

The tea was poured into a cup, his expression was extremely cold. He felt around his pocket with one hand then brought out something invisible. Once he showed the expression of satisfaction in getting vengeance when he poured it into the cup, everyone could tell that what he was holding was poison.

He restrained the hatred on his face before he turned around, smiling as he handed the cup to Ning Ning.

Ning Ning gulped down the cup of tea without realising (anything), Chen Shuang He who was in front of her asked coldly, "Does it hurt?"

Ning Ning was taken by surprise. She then realised that he had acted out putting poison in the tea while he had his back towards her, so she frowned and rolled off the sofa while holding her stomach.

Chen Shuang He laughed coldly as he looked at her. His eyebrows twitched all of a sudden, he watched as she scanned the surroundings before she crawled towards the desk. She could not get up as she was holding her stomach with one hand. She used her other hand to reach up with difficulty, feeling her way around the table to get a pen and paper. She laid the paper on the floor and got on top of it as she endured the pain and wrote quickly.

"What good would that do?" Chen Shuang He walked over. "Even if you were to write my name on a piece of paper, the police would not be able to see it..."

His voice stopped as he was surprised to see the contents on the piece of paper.

A suicide note.

The next line was: I'm sorry, I'm very tired. Goodbye world.

Not only was there no mention of his name, she was trying her best to make this murder look like a suicide.

Chen Shuang He's shoulders undulated for a moment. He said in a cold muffled voice, "Don't think that I can't see through you, you're

just trying to make me let my guard down."

The hand that Ning Ning used to hold the pen with was trembling continuously, her words were getting more and more illegible. She slowly turned her head to look at him as she cried with a smile, "I committed suicide, you won't get into trouble with the police."

Chen Shuang He was a little shocked. He clenched his fist tightly and said with a repressed tone, "You think that by doing this, I will forgive you?"

Ning Ning closed her eyes and cried silently.

Chen Shuang He's shoulders undulated slightly. He looked away and paced about in the room impatiently, he did not dare to look her in the eye from the beginning till the end. He was afraid that if he were to take another look, he would have a change of heart.

"The wedding...is not cancelled." Ning Ning's voice suddenly rang out from behind him.

"I will not get married to you." Chen Shuang He stopped in his tracks, saying coldly with his back towards her, "It doesn't matter if you're dying soon right now. Even if you were alive, I would not marry a loose woman like you, a woman who even laid her hands on her husband's own brother!"

"I'm the opposite." Ning Ning chuckled behind him. "Even if you were to die, I would still hold a wedding in Hawaii alone...a wedding with no groom."

Chen Shuang He was stunned. He turned his head back impulsively. He saw that Ning Ning was lying on her side on the floor, her head was lying on the completed will, she seemed to be losing consciousness, she used the last of her strength to look at him, smile at him.

This was truly a selfish and sly woman. She knew that she was dead meat, so she tried her best to leave herself in his heart forever—as his beloved.

"...Enough!" Chen Shuang He rushed over and took something out of his pocket, he made the action of opening it then fed it to her. "Letting you die like this would be letting you off easy! Drink this..."

Ning Ning took a sip as instructed then turned around and spat it out.

"You..." Chen Shuang He furrowed his brows, he looked like he was getting angry.

"You're not willing to feed it to me with your mouth." Ning Ning laid in his arms frailty, she smiled bitterly at him. "You're not willing to kiss me ever again, right?"

Chen Shuang He's body froze.

"Then there is no meaning in me living." Ning Ning took a gentle glance from his arms. She was actually glancing in Li Shan Zhu's direction, her expression was lazy and charming, it looked a lot like a certain person in his memory. "I came for you, I changed for you, in the end, I died for you... From the beginning till the end, I've been yours."

Li Shan Zhu stood up from the sofa abruptly.

It was a moment later before he sat back down. Director Chen asked from the side, "What's the matter?"

"...Nothing." Li Shan Zhu took off his glasses and covered his eyes with his hands.

Director Chen looked at him for a while before looking at Chen Shuang He suddenly and said, "That will do for today. Shuang He, send Ning Ning home."

"Sure, Dad." Chen Shuang He answered without an expression.

After the two of them left, Director Chen swirled the wine glass in his hand and smiled at Li Shan Zhu. "She reminds you of a certain person, am I right?"

Li Shan Zhu was hunched over, he covered his face with one hand without answering.

"Being able to make someone from a script come alive, being able to make someone from a memory come alive." Director Chen took a sip of wine out of the glass. "After waiting for so long, it's finally almost done."

Li Shan Zhu put down his hand and looked at him from an awkward angle. "What you're saying is..."

"She's just a hair's breadth away from my phantom." Director Chen's eyes sparkled, "The only thing that's left is for her to use her life, her soul, her everything—to passionately love a man!"

1A line from the poem 锦瑟》also known as The Sad Zither

Chapter 126

126: Matchmake

"Where should I send you?" Chen Shuang He asked blandly, "Your house, or that movie theater?"

Ning Ning took a look at him and felt her head hurting a little, he was still hung up over Life Theater.

But upon further consideration, after experiencing such a strange night—witnessing a fight comparable to a fantasy film at the entrance first hand—if one were to be able to ignore that...then that person definitely either had amnesia or dementia.

"Wait." Ning Ning looked out of the window as she shouted abruptly, "Stop here."

The Cayenne stopped. Ning Ning opened the door and walked into a little bookstore by the road. The internet flourished in the modern day, paper media had been on a decline. Therefore, although it was the weekend, besides the cashier who was dozing off, the only other things in the shop were the books that were silently sleeping on the shelves.

Ning Ning stopped in front of a bookshelf. Seeing that the book she wanted was a little bit high up, she stood on her tiptoes, but it was not enough.

A hand reached out from behind her and brought the book down.

Ning Ning looked back. Chen Shuang He was standing behind her, flipping through the book then shrivelled his mouth. He closed the book up with both hands and looked up at the tall shelf in front of him as he asked, "What else?"

Evening, entrance of Life Theater.

The movie theater had even less customers compared to the bookstore. Boss Qu was sitting on the steps of the entrance, he slowly looked up, "...Why are you here again?"

Ning Ning shoved a big bag at him, "I'm here to give you guys something."

"...What are you giving us?" Boss Qu opened the bag to have a look.

"Novels." Ning Ning placed her hands behind her as she smiled. "While you and Shi Tou Ge are in prison—no, you can read them while you are bored. I recommend <<Three Kings One Queen>>, <<Colorful Bone>> and <<I have a Unique Sleeping Technique>>. Simple and pure romance works by Her Highness, Nightmare are very good, they're especially sweet."

Boss Qu, "..."

Holding up the colourful romance novels, Boss Qu's eyes showed a trace of dislike, but he did not want to reject her, so he could only warmly say, "Alright, I'll keep the books, you should go."

"Okay..." Ning Ning turned around and took two steps before she suddenly turned back and asked, "That's right, who opened this movie theater?"

"What are you asking this for?" Boss Qu seemed to not want to answer her question, he would rather read the romance novel in his hand.

"Land is so valuable, every piece of land in this city belongs to someone." Ning Ning looked at Life Theater under the setting sun. "It would not be an exception."

Everything about Life Theater was mysterious and strange, Ning Ning often felt small and powerless being near it, as if she was inside the stomach of a whale, the peristaltic stomach walls felt like it would excrete stomach acid anytime, melting her and the other masked people like food.

She decided to not think from within this stomach but from the outside, to look for the owner of this land, the owner of this movie theater.

She had this idea, Chen Shuang He seemed to have this idea as well.

A fortuitous chance. Ning Ning found out that he seemed to have found something after getting someone to check up on the landowners for the movie theater, but he was unwilling to share it with her.

Shooting for <<Big Brother's Lover>> had started. They had tender affection for each other in the show, but they wouldn't talk to each other outside of the show unless it was necessary. Ning Ning did not know where his hatred for her came from, but she was not about to court an unwilling audience.

In reality, she had something else that was bothering her at the

moment.

"You're here, have a seat." Director Chen said to Ning Ning while grinning from ear to ear.

Ning Ning sat across from him, the man beside him smiled at her in a friendly manner. His face was quite familiar, but she could not remember who he was exactly at the moment. That was until Director Chen said, "Let me introduce you, this is Rising Dragon Technologies' President Li."

"Hello, Miss Ning." President Li shook hands with her. "I saw you in < <The Great Empire> >, you acted really well, my family and I love the show."

It turned out that he was a famous young millionaire on the wealthy list. Ning Ning shook his hands frantically, she heard Director Chen laugh as he said, "President Li is young and promising. Because he has been focusing on his work, he still has no girlfriend at the moment. His mother and I know each other, even I am getting anxious for him."

...Wait a minute, why was there a strong sense of matchmaking?

Ning Ning started to feel awkward. She took glances at Director Chen as she dealt with President Li's passion, shouting in her heart, "Director Chen! What has happened to you Director Chen? Why did you suddenly become a busybody, trying to be a matchmaker for me? ...This, this is completely out of character!"

"Oh, look at me." Seeing that Ning Ning was giving him looks repeatedly, Director Chen slapped his thigh. "What is an old man like me sitting here for? Alright, I'm leaving. You two young people should relax a little, have a nice chat."

...No!! Don't go, Director Chen!!

Ning Ning took great pains to send President Li away, but Director Chen introduced another man to her soon after, a pretty good actor. Although he was not popular, he had a good reputation in the business, he wasn't a celebrity that looked good on the outside but was rotten on the inside.

The matchmaking ended, Director Chen called Ning Ning over. He asked with a pleased expression, "What do you think?"

I think I'm going to feel drunk soon.

"Director Chen." Ning Ning took a deep breath, looking at him with an extremely rigid expression. "What exactly are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to get you a boyfriend." Director Chen said with a smile. "Little Wu is not a bad person. He's a very honest man, he doesn't fool around. Moreover, you two are in the same line of work, you would have a common topic if you were to be together, you should really consider him."

"There's nothing to consider." Ning Ning flatly rejected him.

"Why?" Director Chen said in a guiding manner, "A modern female star does not have to be what they were in the past where they had to stay single or hide their marriage, otherwise, they would lose fans. Nowadays, if you were to find someone, you can show off your love for each other and go on the news for it. After you have a child, you can even go on <<Where Are We Going, Dad?>> 1 together and gain even more fans."

...Oh my God! He had even considered up to the child stage!!

"Child? It doesn't exist...oh that's not right." Ning Ning felt so awkward that she could not even speak properly. "What I mean is, I don't intend to get a boyfriend for now, not to mention giving birth to a child. My career is my priority, career comes first, hahaha..."

"Career comes first, then all the more you should fall in love." Director Chen said sternly, "Don't you think that your current Zhang Xin Ai is lacking a little something?"

"What is it lacking?" Ning Ning asked in surprise.

A crew member walked past them right at this moment, they were holding a rose prop. Director Chen took it out of their hand and handed it to Ning Ning.

"A little fervour." Director Chen smiled. "I cannot help you with that, no one can help you with that, only you can experience it yourself when you are in love."

Ning Ning stared at the rose in her hand for a while. She said with some discomfort, "I had fallen in love before..."

"When, who?" Director Chen let out a cold laugh, "A crush in highschool doesn't count—no, as long as you are not willing to die for him, none of them would count."

...Based on your standards, she should stay single to keep herself safe. What was so bad about being single? At least she would not have to die!

"What about you?" Ning Ning with angst, "Have you ever loved anyone like that?"

Director Chen hmph-ed, "You're asking the obvious."

He left a rose holding Ning Ning behind. Director Chen walked into the rest area with his hands clasped behind his back. He saw that there was a person waiting for him after he walked in.

"Father." Chen Shuang He had a very bad expression on his face. He sat on the sofa with a tea cup in hand, the tea was filled to the brim, he had not taken a single sip. "If you want to find a boyfriend for her, can you put it off until we finish shooting the movie? With you messing around, she will get distracted."

"There's only a week of filming left, why else would I try to introduce a boyfriend to her?" Director Chen sat across from him, looking at Chen Shuang He with a smile. "I know what other people are saying behind our backs. They said that she's like my biological daughter, while you are like a stepchild. What's the matter? These gossip are getting to you?"

Chen Shuang He kept his mouth shut.

"You don't even need me to find a girlfriend for you, don't you have quite a number of suitors?" Director Chen smiled as he shook his head.

"I..." Chen Shuang He did not finish speaking before a phone rang. Director Chen answered the phone then got up and said, "I'll take this outside."

"Another matchmaking prospect?" Chen Shuang He said sarcastically after staying silent for a while.

"That's right, another matchmaking prospect." Director Chen sighed. "I hope I will succeed this time, the little lady has quite the high expectations..."

He rambled on as he left. Behind him, Chen Shuang He was looking down, his hands that were placed on his knees slowly curled into fists. He said in a repressed volume, "When will you be able to care that much about me..."

A powerless despair was exuding out of Chen Shuang He's heart. Why did he work so hard for? What had he gotten for his hard work? His side view was reflected in the window, looking so much like his mother. His mother was always like this. Sitting hunched by the window, the table would be laid with his father's favourite dishes. They went from warm to cold, cold to warm, the sky darkened then it brightened again, he had stayed out all night again. When she asked where he had been, he would answer impatiently, "Don't bother me, I am filming."

Director Chen abandoned his mother, then abandoned him. No matter how much the mother and son pair did for him, he would be blind to it, he would only ever have eyes for his movies, and his Phantom.

A flash of lightning flashed across outside the window, the surroundings turned white, Chen Shuang He's side profile also turned white.

The sky and the land was getting connected by drops of rain, umbrellas opened one after another like blooming flowers.

One of those black flowers belonged to Director Chen, beside him was a white flower. Ning Ning stood under the flower with a face of awkwardness, shaking the hand of a man Director Chen introduced. After exchanging a few words, Ning Ning shifted her umbrella above the head of the other party and walked to the door with him.

Chen Shuang He stood in front of the window as he coldly watched the events unfold.

As if she felt it, Ning Ning stopped in her tracks and took a look in his direction.

"Let me woo you." Divided by the window, divided by the rain, Chen Shuang He pressed a hand on the ice cold window sill, muttering at Ning Ning who was faraway, "Make you fall in love with me, marry me, then leave the entertainment industry to cook, wash and give birth for me at home... He will never get the phantom he wants."

1Where Are We Going, Dad? is a Chinese reality TV show broadcast on Hunan Television. Based on the original South Korean reality show Dad! Where Are We Going? It's basically a reality show where a male celebrity gets left alone with their child or children for a period of time as the production crew film the process.

Additional Note: Every single novel Ning Ning recommends to Boss Qu in this chapter are actual works of the author of this novel.

Chapter 127

127: Sneaking In

Ning Ning felt that Chen Shuang He had been a little weird recently.

For example, he sent this message on WeChat.

[It's my mother's death anniversary tomorrow, will you visit her with me?]

Were they that close? Besides, there were rumours about them recently, shouldn't they avoid each other even more at this point in time?

Seeing that she didn't reply, Chen Shuang He sent another message.

[We'll just be there for a short while, you can visit your mom while we're there.]

Upon seeing that message, Ning Ning felt a little guilty. She had spent too much time at Life Theater, she would be busy with work when she came out, she had never visited Mama.

[Alright, then.] She replied. [What time tomorrow?]

In the afternoon on the next day, Chen Shuang He drove to her house and fetched her to the cemetery.

It was not the Qingming Festival¹, the weekend, nor was it a public holiday, thus, there were barely any people around, there were only tombstones as far as the eye could see.

What was coincidental was that the graves of their mothers were not far apart. When they arrived, Ning Ning saw a line of people mourning Ning Yu Ren.

"Big Sister Ning, you left us too early."

"That's right. Without you, I can't even watch television shows anymore."

"Rubbish, you were watching <<The Overbearing Lord Fell in Love with Me>> yesterday."

"I just wanted to see what today's shows are about!"

It looked like they were old fans of Ning Yu Ren.

"How great." Chen Shuang He stood beside Ning Ning with a pair of sunglasses on his face, saying blandly, "A generational movie empress, even if she were to die, there would still be a crowd of people who love her, who hold her in their memory. Unlike my mother, only I remember her."

It was a lonely gravestone. "Benevolent Mother Chen Hui's Grave" was written on it. No one had prayed for her for a very long time, there were neither flowers nor offerings. It had the depressing aura of being forgotten by the people of the world.

"Come to think of it, my mother would frequently watch your mother's films." Chen Shuang He bent down, placing the white flower bouquet in his hand in front of the gravestone. "She would always watch them with me."

Were they fans of Mama? Ning Ning said modestly, "Thank you."

Chen Shuang He smiled for a moment, his smile was a little weird.

He remembered the times when he was a child, when he was forcibly hugged by his mother, when the room was darkened with all the curtains closed, the only light came from the black and white television in front of them. Mother would point at the television and say, "Look, it is this woman. She seduced your father, she made him not come home anymore, ignoring both of us."

Ning Yu Ren.

Ancient, modern, republic; heroine, department store worker, a rich young lady with bound feet3...; the movies this woman was a part of, he had never missed one. He would finish watching them even if it meant forcing himself, because only by doing that, would his mother revert back to her normal self, pulling open the curtains to let light shine in from the outside, making him delicious braised fish and smiling at him gently.

"That's right." Chen Shuang He stood up and looked at Ning Ning. "How is your matchmaking going?"

A trace of awkwardness appeared on Ning Ning's face. "Cough, do you see me as a joke as well..."

"I am not as abominable as my father." Chen Shuang He smiled. "If I'm not wrong, he's forcing you to fall in love for the sake of a certain role in a certain script right?"

Ning Ning remained silent for a moment. She felt that there was no

need to hide this matter from him, thus she acknowledged it and answered, "Phantom of the Theater."

"It's as I thought..." Chen Shuang He pondered for a moment. "Do you need my help?"

"Huh?" Ning Ning looked at him in astonishment.

"If you have to practice falling in love with a man..." Chen Shuang He took a step towards her, the distance between them was that of two people sharing a hug. He said by her ear, "How about me?"

Ning Ning frantically took a few steps back. "Are you kidding me?"

The group of people who had been in front of Ning Yu Ren's gravestone left just at that moment. Ning Ning walked over frantically. Before she could get to the grave, a big gust of wind suddenly kicked up.

That gust of wind knocked over a metal drum in front of Ning Yu Ren's grave. Although the cemetery had already stated that burning of joss paper was not allowed, older people could not kick this habit, so as a compromise, the cemetery provided a type of metal drum for them, any kind of offerings would be burned in that drum.

That metal drum was very heavy, it would be very difficult to knock over even with human strength. Yet, for some reason, it was knocked over by a gust of wind today. The yet-to-burn paper money fluttered and swirled in the air towards Ning Ning and Chen Shuang He, there were embers at the corners of some of them, they looked like moths on fire.

"Watch out." Chen Shuang He took a step forward and took her in his arms. The moths landed on him, then fell on the floor powerlessly, the wind had finally stopped. He looked down at her and asked, "Are you alright?"

Ning Ning looked at him dumbfoundedly.

Paper money fluttered past, leaving ashes all over his body. "Ah, your clothes got dirty." Ning Ning reached up and patted the ashes on his shoulders. She took the opportunity to press the Life Theater ticket into her palm, then hid it behind her body.

Her heart could not help but thump. "Why? Why would there be a Life Theater ticket here? Who is it for? Him or me? If it is for him...despair, paranoia, refusing to accept fate, having delusions of changing his fate—which one does he belong to?"

On the way back, Ning Ning stared at Chen Shuang He the whole

way. She was staring holes at him, making Chen Shuang He a little uncomfortable.

"Is there something on my face?" He could not help but ask.

"Talented, born with a silver spoon, a winner in life." Ning Ning said.

"..." Why are you praising me all of a sudden, what motives do you have?!

"Being gifted, being successful in whatever you do, you had everything you wanted in life... In other words, you are simply like another species compared to a mortal like me." Ning Ning asked him while supporting her cheek, "A mortal would always want to turn back time, to correct their mistakes. What about you? A person like you, would you want to go back in time?"

"No."

"Liar."

Chen Shuang He laughed. "Alright, I do."

Ning Ning laughed along with him. She secretly returned that Life Theater ticket into his pocket while he didn't notice.

A movie ticket, a chance to change your fate, this chance belonged to him. No matter if he decided to take it or not, she should not take it away from him.

"...Hold on." Ning Ning frowned suddenly. She looked at her surroundings outside the car window. "Where are you going?"

Chen Shuang He was surprised as well. He looked around for a moment. "That's strange, did I go the wrong way?"

It was not the way back to her home, nor was it the way back to his home.

For some reason, Chen Shuang He drove the car to the street where Life Theater resided.

"I'm sorry." Chen Shuang He stopped by an intersection, spinning the steering wheel as he prepared to turn around. "I've been driving for too long today, I'm a little absent-minded. I'll send you home right now."

"It's fine." Ning Ning smiled although there was a trace of melancholy between her brows. Based on past experiences, Life Theater would send tickets to the candidates it favoured, and the

person who had received its tickets would go to Life Theater due to all sorts of inexplicable reasons.

The wheels twisted for a while before it stopped moving altogether.

Chen Shuang He stepped on the accelerator a few times, but the car did not react at all. He could do nothing but get off. He got behind the car and took a look, then placed both his hands on his head and let out an annoyed sigh.

"What's the matter?" Ning Ning got out of the car as well.

"The car blew a tire." Chen Shuang He said with chagrin. A drop of water fell on his nose. He looked up and said with even more gloom, "What an unlucky day."

It started to rain.

The car had no umbrellas. Chen Shuang He took off his coat and placed it over Ning Ning's head, the two of them then walked towards the auto shop across the road.

"You don't actually have to follow me, you can just wait for me in the car." Chen Shuang He said.

"It's fine, I will get bored sitting alone in there." Ning Ning casually found an excuse. Her eyes, on the other hand, looked towards the auto shop's neighbour...Life Theater.

A movie ticket that appeared all of a sudden, along with a tire that burst all of a sudden, they seemed to be leading Chen Shuang He to a certain direction—be it by design or by accident. Ning Ning took a look in that direction and was startled, Chen Shuang He was startled as well as he looked in that direction along with her.

At the entrance of Life Theater was a brand new poster.

Title: < <The Love Rival in the Television> >

Starring: Chen Hui

Chen Shuang He's deceased mother appeared on the poster. She was inside a room, surrounded by countless televisions. Every television set was turned on, in them was Ning Yu Ren in different get ups—a heroine, a department store worker, a rich young lady with bound feet, a valiant and heroic female general, a calm and collected female spy...

Being surrounded by so many Ning Yu Rens, Chen Hui who was a housewife was at the end of the road. She was slashing at the television set in front of her with a kitchen knife in her hand, shouting

silently with a ferocious expression.

"...Who did this?!" At first, Chen Shuang He thought that he was seeing things. It was only after he rushed over and had a good look at the content of the poster that he immediately lost his temper and tore the poster off the wall. "Who put my mother on this without permission?"

Chen Shuang He turned his head and looked at the entrance of Life Theater. The bothersome Doorman wasn't around tonight, perhaps he was taking shelter inside upon seeing the rain. Since the Doorman was not around, that meant that there was no one who could stop him.

With the poster he had torn down in his hand, Chen Shuang He walked towards the entrance of Life Theater in large strides.

"Wait!" Ning Ning held him back from behind. "It's best that you don't go in."

"Let go." Chen Shuang He shook himself free from her hand, his eyes shining with rage. He said with gritted teeth, "To smear the image of my mother like this, no matter what, the people inside have to give me an explanation!"

Ning Ning stumbled from his push. When she found her footing back, Chen Shuang He had long disappeared.

Feeling anxious, Ning Ning chased after him hurriedly, but stopped at the entrance.

"...I don't have a ticket." She murmured, turning back out of reverence.

A phone suddenly rang out, it was close by, but it was not hers.

Ning Ning was shocked. She took down the coat that was placed on her head, feeling around the pocket. Her entire body shuddered abruptly. She slowly retracted her hand from the pocket, her fingers were holding Chen Shuang He's phone, along with...a Life Theater ticket.

The ticket she had secretly put back in Chen Shuang He's coat—when it rained, Chen Shuang He had taken off the coat and placed it on her, and now...

"You don't have a ticket." Ning Ning gazed at the direction of the entrance and murmured. She abruptly turned around and looked at the wall beside the theater. The wall that was originally supposed to be empty had a brand new blank poster.

Lines and lines of blood slowly flowed down the poster, forming two words—< < Sneaking In > >.

1Qingming Festival is when Chinese people traditionally visit ancestral tombs to sweep them.

2It's a Chinese tradition to pray for and worship the dead.

3Foot binding was the Chinese custom of breaking and tightly binding the feet of young girls in order to change the shape and size of their feet; during the time it was practiced, bound feet were considered a status symbol and a mark of beauty.

Chapter 128

128: Night of Revelry

...Was there still hope for Chen Shuang He??

"Hey! Chen Shuang He! Hey!" Ning Ning shouted a few times at the entrance. Not only did Chen Shuang He ignore her, no one else came out to take a look at her. She was so anxious that she started to jump about.

She had no choice, she would answer the phone call for him first.

"Hmm, why is it you?" Director Chen's voice rang out from the other end. "Where's Shuang He?"

Ning Ning pressed on her temple that was hurting. "He's not available at the moment, I'll get him to call you back later."

"Oh, there's no need." Director Chen laughed. "I heard the two of you were together...did the two of you go to the cemetery together?"

"Yes, that's right." Ning Ning was a person who was once bitten, twice shy, so she was afraid that he would bring up the topic of matchmaking next, thus, she asked a question first, "Director Chen, I heard that today is your wife's death anniversary, why did you not visit?"

"I'm a very busy man. I'm in the midst of preparing for the next movie, a very important movie." While speaking about his wife, Director Chen's tone was that of someone talking blandly about a stranger. "Shuang He being there is enough. That's right, your mother is also buried at that cemetery. Did you visit her while you were there?"

"I did, there were even a few of Mama's fans..." Ning Ning said.

"Oh? Tell me about it." Director Chen was more interested in those few fans than his deceased wife's matter. He urged her on very strongly, Ning Ning could only describe the entire process. He sighed as he said in sad remembrance, "Only old folks like us would remember Yu Ren's peerless charm, I should go visit her next time as well..."

"You don't have to," Ning Ning suddenly interrupted him, "Chen Shuang He and...your wife needs you more, isn't that so?"

"So what?" Director Chen answered naturally, "I don't need them."

Ning Ning fell silent, she did not know how she should answer that. Director Chen, on the other hand, continued to talk, "Then let's make it this weekend. After I deal with everything I have on hand, I will have exactly one day to visit your mother, do you want to come along? Tell her that you will be acting as Phantom. Ah, how could I have forgotten? I have to personally tell her that no matter what..."

"I...I'm not available on that day." Ning Ning declined Director Chen. From the beginning to the end, Director Chen had been talking about Mama. He was not concerned about Chen Shuang He at all, even more so for his deceased wife. This made Ning Ning feel strangely awkward. She also understood why Mama had kept her distance from Director Chen in those years in the past—outside of work, she never seemed to interact with him.

An unrequited love was sometimes scarier than unrequited hate.

After she hung up, Ning Ning stared at the entrance for a good while. Out of the blue, Ning Ning gritted her teeth, holding onto the ticket in her hand tightly, she summoned her courage and walked in.

The doorman was absent tonight, there was no one to stop Chen Shuang He from entering, there was also no one to stop her from doing so.

The blood red poster by the entrance and her own experience of almost sneaking in last time made Ning Ning's legs feel a little limp. She had already made all sorts of mental preparation, but had never expected that Life Theater would look like this.

"Crack!"

A small salute rang out, colourful ribbons flew in the air.

The salute had been fired from the audience seat. The seats that were in ruins before had already returned to its original state. Carved wooden chairs were lined up neatly in a row. The seats were filled up—Ancient Noblewoman Mask, Crying Old Man Mask, Monkey Mask...masked people had filled the seats to the brim.

There were still a few masked people walking about in between the audience seats. They were either holding a beverage box or a snack box, shouting as they walked around, "Hot drinks, cold drinks, roasted corn!"

"Give me a cup of hot coffee!"

"This old man wants a cup of hot tea."

"Orange juice with more ice."

"I want roasted corn! Two sticks!"

Masks covered everyone's faces, their mouths weren't even showing, how would they eat? No, they didn't have to eat, they just wanted to enjoy the atmosphere at the moment. Dancing ecstatically! Feelings running high!

With a boom, two blood red words jumped out on the big screen in front of them, < < Sneaking In > >.

Starring: Chen Shuang He.

Upon seeing that name, Ning Ning's heart thumped. She murmured, "Is it too late..."

But immediately after that, one word jumped out at the bottom of the screen: 'Executioner'.

"Me!" A masked person raised their hand.

"Me! Me! Me!" Countless hands raised from the audience seats.

Ning Ning simply did not dare to go over. She stood by the seat that was closest to the entrance, looking at the crowd of tightly packed raised hands which looked like a school of fish chasing after bait.

"They don't know Chen Shuang He, neither do they hold any sort of grudge against him." A man's voice rang out beside her. Ning Ning turned her head around and saw that Shi Zhong Tang had been standing by her side since an unknown amount of time. He looked at the school of fish and said, "The reason they are volunteering so enthusiastically is purely because it's their...it's the only entertainment for us masked people."

"Entertainment?" Ning Ning gazed at him.

"Yes, the Night of Revelry." Shi Zhong Tang turned and smiled at her, "Tonight, every masked person is part of the audience, they can also be an actor."

A man suddenly stood up from the audience seat, he said coldly, "Me."

His deep voice blasted across the entire theater like a snowy wind. The hand that was closest to him retracted itself, followed by the second one, the third one, the fourth one...every raised hand retracted itself like a wave.

Finally, a pillar of light shone down from the ceiling on the man.

White coat, a black belt around the waist, a snow white mask on the face... it was Boss Qu.

After all the other competitors gave in, his name quickly appeared on the screen.

Executioner: Boss Qu.

Almost in the instant his name had appeared, below the word executioner, another word emerged: 'Saviour'.

Boss Qu's ice cold stare swept across the audience seat, the silence amongst them was deafening. How enthusiastic they had been was how quiet they were now.

"We'll go with this." A masked person said.

"That's right. Let's quickly begin, I can't wait anymore. The last time someone snuck in was around 1991 or 1992."

"Ah, it should be that woman, I remember her."

"Why do you always mention her? Quickly! Quickly! I can't wait anymore, I want to watch a new movie!"

With a crack, the same pillar of light shone from the ceiling onto Ning Ning...s neighbour.

Shi Zhong Tang had raised a hand lazily, his jade mask reflecting the white light.

Every masked person held their breaths. The theater was silent, countless eyes were looking over from behind their masks, some with ridicule, some with bewilderment, some with indifference, some with ruefulness... The coldest pair of eyes among them belonged to Boss Qu.

"All of you fought to be the executioner, then I am the only one who can be the saviour." Shi Zhong Tang said while grinning, "After all, in a movie, it wouldn't be interesting if there was only an antagonist. There's good and evil, just and unjust, victor and loser, it would only be interesting if there's a winner and a loser...Ning Ning, won't you say so? "

He placed his arm on Ning Ning's shoulder and got closer to her like a lover, whispering into her ear.

Ning Ning was slightly surprised, what he said was...

"Get over here." Boss Qu seemed to not be able to stomach what he

was doing. He said coldly, "Go be the saviour!"

"Ah, I'm coming, I'm coming." Shi Zhong Tang gave Ning Ning's shoulder a pat, then walked towards the big screen.

Executioner: Boss Qu.

Saviour: Shi Zhong Tang.

Both the executioner and the saviour returned to their respective wooden carved chair. The pillar of white light followed them wherever they went, differentiating them from the rest of the masked people beside them. Once the theme song started playing, both of them held onto the armrests beside them, one could see with naked eyes that they started to turn transparent from their fingers.

The theme songs from the previous movies were all sung by the main character of the movie, but it was different this time.

Maybe it was because of the fact that Chen Shuang He was not a masked person, so they had someone else to sing for him?

"Enter with a ticket, leave without one." It was the voice of a teenager, no, a young man, old man, little boy...Ning Ning shook her head, what was with her, she actually could not determine the age of the voice?

It was a very strange voice. It sounded like a teenager for one moment, a young man in the next, then an old man, even the emotion in the voice went through a lot of changes. It was happy one moment, angry the next, then sad. At last, he sang with an extremely joyful voice, "Entering without a ticket is also permissible, stake your life, sing loudly the Night of Revelry!!"

"Night of Revelry!!"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Let's begin, let's begin!"

A group of masked people started jumping from the audience seats. Shaking figures, frenzied laughter, and suppressed emotions that were close to madness covered Ning Ning's back with a layer of sweat.

"Come over here." A young girl wearing a court lady's mask pulled Ning Ning's arm all of a sudden. She led Ning Ning to an empty seat, cordial and friendly, just that her eyes were stirred up with excitement, they were like two whirlpools that were continuously spinning, giving people chills. She smiled as she said, "This is close to the screen, you would be able to see clearly."

Ning Ning looked at the screen over her shoulders.

This was her first time watching a movie here purely as an audience.

The image was a blur. There was a woman's voice, it sounded near yet far, like a floating jellyfish, like an incessant chatter by the ears.

"Being gifted, being successful in whatever you do, you had everything you wanted in life... In other words, you are simply like another species compared to a mortal like me."

Ning Ning exclaimed. The voice from her mouth sounded exactly the same as the voice on the screen. It was her voice, it was what she had said to Chen Shuang He previously.

"A mortal would always want to turn back time, to correct their mistakes. What about you? A person like you, would you want to go back in time?"

A pair of eyes opened abruptly, the blurred image suddenly turned clear.

"What's going on? Why did I dream of her..." Chen Shuang He complained quietly. He sat up on the bed and looked at the room in front of him before he fell into a daze. He took the blanket off and jumped from the bed, running to the mirror.

In the mirror was the reflection of a teenager.

He was about fourteen years old. His body was tall and slender, his looks was strikingly handsome, like a pretty boy by the lakeside in the Greek mythology, loved by the fairies in the lake.

"It's me." Chen Shuang He touched his face, the pretty boy in the mirror mirrored his action. He muttered, "I've returned to the past."

"That's right, you've returned to the past." A man's voice rang out behind him.

Chen Shuang He had a huge shock. He did not turn back however, his vision was fixed onto the mirror in front of him.

Not far behind him stood a man, an adult who was a head taller than him. The posture he had while looking down at Chen Shuang He, the jade mask that was covering his face, the gorgeous peach coloured corner of his eyes—he looked enchanting even without a smile.

Chapter 129

129: The Gradually Disappearing Man

Chen Shuang He suddenly shuddered as he looked at the man in front of him.

"Customer, please follow me."

"...Hold on, you are not a customer."

"Stowaway!! Hahaha, come quickly, everybody! Someone snuck in, someone finally snuck in!!"

Masked people swarmed over. The screen had a blood-coloured countdown timer. At the end of the countdown, a pair of eyes suddenly opened on the screen.

Like the headlights of a car suddenly lighting up in a dark night, two beams of white light shone on him, stinging Chen Shuang He's eyes enough for him to close his eyes. Once he opened his eyes again, he had returned to the past.

"Is this a dream?" Chen Shuang He murmured as he slowly reached out a hand towards Shi Zhong Tang.

If it was a dream, his finger would pass through the mask in front of him, but it didn't. His finger definitely touched the mask, a mildly warm yet cool feeling seeped into his finger.

Chen Shuang He immediately retracted his finger, looking at the other party with surprise and caution. "You're real?"

"What's real?"

A woman's voice suddenly rang out behind him. Chen Shuang He abruptly turned his head around, a woman with long hair and a pale face was standing behind him, looking at him with a smile.

It was said that having fair skin would help make up for three flaws, but this woman was fair in a feeble way, a frail way, in such a way where she had no trace of vigour. She was like an outline of a person that was drawn on the wall with a pencil, if one were to casually erase her with an eraser, they would be able to easily erase her from the world.

"Mother..." Chen Shuang He murmured. He reached out to touch

her face, his movement was so careful, he was afraid that his finger would pass through her face.

He touched it.

A pale, rough, dehydrated face.

"What's wrong?" The woman in front of him—his mother, Chen Hui—asked with uncertainty, "Why are you crying?"

Chen Shuang He was stunned for a moment. He touched his cheek, it was wet with his tears.

"Poor child, it's loneliness, right?" Chen Hui sighed. She hugged him and said, "Your father said he would bring us on a vacation today, but he went back on his word at the very last minute... Do you know why?"

She held Chen Shuang He's hand as they walked downstairs. Even though it was a villa, the lighting was darker than a typical house. With one look at the surroundings, one could see that it was due to the fact that the curtains were all drawn. She brought Chen Shuang He to the sofa as they sat down together, then picked up a remote control and pointed it in front of her, pressing a button. The television turned on, Ning Yu Ren's face appeared on the screen.

<< Sicilian Holiday >>, Ning Yu Ren and a foreign actor portrayed a foreign love story.

"It's because of her." Chen Hui stared at Ning Yu Ren as she talked to her son, "She has taken your father away again. Filming, filming, filming. After this one, there would still be the next one. With her around, your father will never return to our side."

"Switch the television off." Shi Zhong Tang told Chen Shuang He as he stood behind the sofa, "It's enough to watch the television once in a while. Don't indulge in it and treat the actress in the television as an imaginary enemy."

Chen Shuang He glanced at him then asked, "Mother, is there someone else in the house today?"

"Who are you talking about?" Chen Hui turned back and took a look. Shi Zhong Tang was clearly standing in front of her, but she could not see him. She looked at her surroundings then smiled at Chen Shuang He. "There's no one, don't scare me. Alright, let's watch the television together...what are you doing?"

The television was switched off. Chen Shuang He turned back and smiled at her. "Mother, since Father doesn't want to go on vacation

with you, I'll go with you."

Chen Hui cracked a smile. "But don't you want to act?"

As a popular child star—furthermore, he was one of the rare ones whose looks did not deteriorate once he grew up, on the contrary, he was a child star who had grown better and better looking—the economy had been very good recently for Chen Shuang He. He had not even joined a film school officially, yet he had already taken on a few consecutive roles in a few shows. He had even accepted a role in a big time ancient film made up of veteran actors, acting as the young version of Qin Shi Huang¹.

<<Qin Shi Huang>> was a film which held an extremely important place in Chen Shuang He's life. Not only did it help in his transition from a child star to a bonafide actor, it also helped him forge friendships with the seniors he had acted with. His success in the future could not be had without the support of the seniors.

"...I don't want to anymore." Chen Shuang He held Chen Hui's arm, gently leaning on her. "I'll accompany you."

Chen Hui had died on the day <<Qin Shi Huang>> finished shooting. She died by her lonesome on the sofa in the living room—without her husband, without her son—the only thing that accompanied her was the remote control in her hand and Ning Yu Ren in the television.

He did not want history to repeat itself.

"...But I don't want to go out." Chen Hui slowly turned her head and looked out of the window, her almost deathly still eyes had a trace of expectation. "What if your father comes back? There should be someone at home to wait for him."

"...It's because you have always been waiting for him that he doesn't show up." Chen Shuang He forcibly pulled her up from the sofa. "Let him wait for you once in a while!"

But even when she was on vacation, Chen Hui would still worry about the house. Going overseas would be out of the question. Even if they were going for a vacation domestically, she would not be willing to go anywhere slightly farther away, she would get fidgety after three days, urging Chen Shuang He to book return tickets.

This life persisted for half a year.

Then, Chen Hui fell ill.

"Go back. I want to go back." She held onto Chen Shuang He's hand

while on the sickbed, unwilling to let go, using all her strength to urge him, "Quickly help me book return tickets."

Chen Shuang He felt a wave of sadness. "There's no one waiting for you at home, what are you going back for?"

It had been half a year. Director Chen had yet to give her a single call, she had been the one who called him, reporting her locations and her activities to him before he impatiently hung up on her.

"Do you know how to talk to women?" Shi Zhong Tang's voice rang out behind him, he grinned cheekily. "Women are actually clear about everything in their hearts. She doesn't need you to give her an explanation, all she needs is a little consolation."

In this half a year, this man who claimed to be Shi Zhong Tang had been haunting him like a spirit. Chen Shuang He was used to him and had been treating him as if he were not there. As for the suggestions Shi Zhong Tang had been giving out in this half a year...due to the suspicion he had towards him and the theater, Chen Shuang He did not heed a single one.

"Why not..." Chen Shuang He told his mother who was lying on her sick bed, "Get divorced with Father."

Chen Hui was startled for a moment, then she fell silent.

"Looks like she still has feelings for your father." Shi Zhong Tang gave him another suggestion, "The reason a woman cannot forget their old flame is because they have yet to meet a new and better one... Before you persuade your mother to get a divorce, why not introduce her to a handsome man?"

"...Where's the remote?" Chen Hui abruptly looked at her surroundings, her sight was fixed on the remote control on the table. "Give me the remote control."

Chen Shuang He knew what she wanted to do. He did not want to hand the remote over to her, but she just rolled off her sick bed, crawling towards it. Having no choice, Chen Shuang He could only hand her the remote control.

Sure enough, she switched onto a channel which has Ning Yu Ren inside, then let out a long sigh. She laid sideways on the sickbed, looking at the other party in a daze. Her face that had been withering by the day contrasted with Ning Yu Ren's beauty and charm.

"I'm so envious of her." Chen Hui murmured.

"There's nothing to be envious about." Chen Shuang He said

irritably, "She only dazzles on stage! She only has a junior high education, she is a single mother, the sole breadwinner for her family, there are still many more hardships that are unknown to outsiders!"

Chen Hui slowly turned her head and looked at him. "I'm willing to swap my life with hers."

Chen Shuang He was dumbstruck.

"I'm willing to exchange my family background and education in exchange for her acting skills." A line of tears streamed down the corner of Chen Hui's eyes, wetting the pillow. "But even if I were to give all of these to her, I would not be able to swap my life with hers...it's all up to you."

"Up to me?" Chen Shuang He asked.

"Yes, it's up to you." Chen Hui reached out and touched his face, she said gently, "You're different from me, you have acting skills. With regard to acting, you are a genius. So please, take it as your mother begging you, before I die...you have to make your father look us both straight in the eye."

After going in a big circle, everything returned to the beginning in the end.

Previously, after Chen Hui died, Chen Shuang He vowed that he would definitely crush Ning Yu Ren with his acting skills so that Director Chen's sight would return to him and his mother. Now, Chen Hui was still alive, but Chen Shuang He was back on his original path.

No, it didn't count as the original path.

"What did you say?" Chen Shuang He held his phone and frowned, "I've been pushed back in line?"

"That's right." His manager laughed. "But it's fine, if you can't act in this movie, we can switch to something else. Autumn Entertainment is about to shoot an idol drama, <<You, My Childhood Sweetheart>>, the director thinks that your look is very suitable to be the male lead..."

<<You, My Childhood Sweetheart>>? He had never even heard of it, it was probably a bad show, or it was an ordinary idol drama that was forgotten by people once it ended, how could it compare to a classic like <<Qin Shi Huang>>? Chen Shuang He interrupted his manager, "Who is going to act as the young version of Qin Shi Huang in <<Qin Shi Huang>>?"

His manager fell silent for a moment before he said, "Qu Yan."

Qu Yan? Who was that? Chen Shuang He thought for a long time but could not find this person from the deepest part of his memory. Was he an actor who had risen up while he was gone for half a year?

"...Actually, he was the person who had substituted for you, acting as the young version of Qin Shi Huang in the television version of <<Qin Shi Huang>>." His manager explained, "He did quite well. Most importantly, the senior actors in the same show all liked him and recommended him for the movie version."

Although Chen Shuang He felt that it was a pity, but this was an opportunity he had chosen to let go, he could not blame anyone. Thus, he said, "Then forget it. Help me keep a lookout for other opportunities. I heard that Director Shi has been making preparations for a gangster movie, help me inquire about the situation from the inside."

He had acted in many movies and shows in his life, the roles that were worth acting were not many, the ones that would leave a deep impression on people were even more scarce. Good movies were always the ones you find, not the ones you seek. There were a few that he had to act in—number one was <<Qin Shi Huang>>, number two was <<Boundless Hell>>, number three was <<After Juliet's Death>>.

<<Qin Shi Huang>> helped him shed the skin of a child star and established the foundations of his connections. <<Boundless Hell>> caused his talent to bloom, and become a genius acknowledged by the industry. <<After Juliet's Death>> made everyone in the nation remember his name. This was the trilogy in Chen Shuang He's life. One could say that without these three films, there would be no Chen Shuang He.

An actor's accomplishment depended on the movie, a movie's accomplishment also depended on the actor, they supplemented each other, neither could do without another.

But half a year later...

"What?" Chen Shuang He said angrily, "I've been pushed back in line again? What's the reason?"

"There's no helping it." His manager said helplessly, "Qu Yan agreed to take this film."

"But doesn't Director Shi fancy me more?" Chen Shuang He said frantically.

"Director Shi does fancy you more...but the top brass of the

company fancies Qu Yan." His Manager started to advise him earnestly again, "This won't do. We should just pick another movie, you shouldn't be too picky. You have not acted in a single film in the past half a year, you can't go on like this! You can't continue to laze around like this!"

"Let me think about it..." Chen Shuang He replied with something perfunctory before hanging up.

The showerhead sprayed water continuously, the mirror in front of him was fogged up, one could only vaguely see the figure of a healthy youth. It was not like the pretty boy by the lakeside in Greek mythology, he looked like a hunter who was able to hunt tigers and leopards instead.

"I'm not being lazy." Chen Shuang He let out a bitter laugh. "I was just...preparing for <<Boundless Hell.>>"

Half a year of effort was wasted, the lead actor was not him.

Even when he had wanted to lower himself and act in other roles that would be popular in the future, he would also be in low priority.

How could this be?

In the summer half a year later, Chen Shuang He walked alone in the streets. He did not wear sunglasses nor a facemask, but no one surrounded him, no one took out a pen and paper nor even undressed themselves to get him to sign on their bodies.

The pedestrians walked past him without a change in expression, no one had recognised him.

"Why?" Chen Shuang He could not help but murmur, "It has been but half a year..."

In that half a year, it was not that he did not act in anything, it was just that he could not land any good shows, any good roles. Why? He walked past the entrance of a movie theater. The entrance of the theater had a huge poster, on the poster were two big words <<Boundless Hell>>. A group of established actors along with a young face, it was the face of an extraordinarily handsome young man.

Chen Shuang He stopped in front of the poster, turning his head and staring at the young man.

A patron came out of the movie theater, they exclaimed when they walked past him. They stopped in their tracks and stared at him for a while, then said with a smile, "Bro, you kind of look like the male lead

in that movie."

Chen Shuang He smiled at him, his smile was extremely unsightly.

"Upon closer inspection." That patron got closer, "It's not just the demeanour, even your looks are similar. Haha, do you want to take part in an imitation show?"

"No." Chen Shuang He walked past him in extreme embarrassment. He walked past flights and flights of posters. On them was a youth who had almost the same style, almost the same look as him, this youth named Qu Yan was silently replacing him.

Claiming the life that should have belonged to him.

The hot sun hung above his head, Chen Shuang He felt a spell of dizziness standing underneath it, he felt that he was out of breath and nauseous at the same time. He gave Director Chen a call.

After it rang a few times, the call connected.

"Father," Chen Shuang He said, "Mother is critically ill."

"Hmmm," Director Chen asked calmly, "is there anything else?"

Chen Shuang He took a deep breath. "Are you not going to come back and visit her? She is holding on just to wait for your return."

"I'm preparing for a new film."

"...What film?"

"< After Juliet's Death >" ah, have I not told you about it?" Director Chen thought for a moment before he laughed, "Oh, I think I really have not told you about it."

He tightened his fist before loosening it again, Chen Shuang He asked, "Has the male lead been decided?"

"It has been decided." Director Chen said, "Qu Yan."

This name again! This man again...

"...Can you give me a chance?" Chen Shuang He acted calm as he said that, but two streams of tears were rolling down from his eyes. "Till now, I have not been able to act in a good show for Mother."

The shot slowly pulled out. In the audience seat of Life Theater, Ning Ning watched the crying face on the screen.

The masked person beside her pinched on handfuls and handfuls of popcorn, their mouths could not eat, so they made a sound with their

hands to express their happiness. The other masked people were also chatting away happily, treating the life that was being shown on screen as a comedy.

Ning Ning slowly looked down at the coat in her arms.

The coat belonged to Chen Shuang He, it was quite wet from being used to shelter her from the rain. She took out an odd-numbered designated ticket.

When one wanted to change the fate of another person, the movie theater would send them an odd-numbered designated ticket, to let them designate a certain character to transmigrate as.

"Ning Ning, you are a customer." Ning Ning remembered what Shi Zhong Tang secretly told her before. He said, "You are different from the masked people, you can come in with the ticket at any time...you can choose to join any side."

1Qin Shi Huang was the founder of the Qin dynasty and the first emperor of a unified China.

Chapter 130

130: I've Waited For You For A Very Long Time

< <After Juliet's Death> >, as the name suggested, was a movie about family grudges.

The story was set in modern times. Two companies in the same industry that were at loggerheads with each other, but the son and daughter of the companies had to fall in love at first sight with each other then eloped together.

But while they were eloping, they met up with a traffic accident.

The female lead character died.

"This story happened after Juliet had died." Director Chen waved his hand. "To ease enmity with a smile? That's impossible. Because only Juliet had died, Romeo did not die."

If this was Shakespeare's story, then Romeo would take his life once he woke up in the hospital, but the writer for this script was Director Chen's designated scriptwriter Li Shan Zhu...this guy experienced something when he was young, which caused either the male or female lead in every script written by him to be a scheming bitch.

"Romeo didn't die. Once he had woken up in the hospital, he found out that the two companies were at each other's throats, they even told each other: No matter how much you lower your prices, I will lower it by half!" Director Chen said, "Worried that the two companies would collapse and a third company would take advantage if the price war were to continue, Romeo could only suppress the pain in his heart. He found a girl who looked exactly like Juliet, then, he walked her through and taught her how to be Juliet."

This girl successfully deceived everyone, including Juliet's father.

Even the male lead started to gradually get confused. Did Juliet really die? Was he just having a nightmare? The traffic accident was just a dream, Juliet did not actually die, she was just in front of him, in his arms, looking at him with an expression full of love just like the past.

In the end, the truth came to light.

Everyone had to face the same question—Juliet was dead, what

should they do with the one who was still alive?

"The actress for Juliet has been decided. As for Romeo," Director Chen's vision swept across the three people in front of him, "the actor will be chosen from one of you."

Chen Shuang He knew that his chance would be very fair. Between popularity and acting skills, Director Chen would always lean towards acting skills, but the others did not think that way. Once Director Chen left, the other two immediately gossiped about him.

"Sigh, I think we are just here to go through the motions. After all, the director's son is here."

"Shh, don't let him hear you."

A group of vile people. Chen Shuang He could not be bothered about them. He walked out of the room without saying anything and went to the dance studio to practice dancing.

Because < <After Juliet's Death> > was a musical film.

It was not that there were no musical films in the past, it was just that none of them were popular. Most people watched them as comedies, they would jokingly say that the characters in them would start dancing whenever they had a disagreement.

But < <After Juliet's Death> > was different. Although it wore the skin of a musical film, underneath it was essentially a criminal romance film. Li Shan Zhu's script supplemented the interesting nature of a musical film, causing this movie to become a hit overnight. It became the box office champion for the year, it started a frenzy of musical films afterwards, but even up till 2017 no movie was able to surpass it.

The reason that the movie had become such a huge success was because of how the script was refined over a hundred times, not to mention the sweat the male and female leads had shed in the dance studio.

"Zhao Yu Fen." Chen Shuang He thought as he pushed open the door to the dance studio, "She was the female lead for < <After Juliet's Death> > last time, would it still be her this time? We had a pleasant relationship last time, she taught me quite a few times, this time it should be..."

He was stunned at the doorway.

The dance studio was surrounded by big mirrors, there were two people dancing inside, their reflections were everywhere, the two of

them formed a grand ball.

One of them was Zhao Yu Fen. She was a girl with bland features, her look was too ordinary for show business, so after < <After Juliet's Death> >, she seemed to not have any roles which left a deep impression on people. All of her radiance seemed to have burnt out in < <After Juliet's Death> >.

She was now doing a ballroom dance with another youth, that youth seemed to not be able to dance as he was being led by her. The two of them were talking and laughing, it was a while before they noticed Chen Shuang He at the doorway.

"Chen Shuang He?" The youth stopped in his tracks. He walked towards him and reached out a hand in a friendly manner. "Hello, I am Qu Yan, I am making a cameo appearance as Juliet's father."

Without blinking, Chen Shuang He stared at him...the masked man standing behind Qu Yan.

He was different from Shi Zhong Tang who was all smiles, he was a masked person that had a slightly gloomy disposition. He wore white Chinese-style unlined upper garment that only old people like to wear, his face was covered by a spotless snow white mask as he stood silently behind Qu Yan.

"Speaking of which, why did you want to be the father of the female lead?" Zhao Yu Fen said to Qu Yan with a smile, "I heard that initially you could have been the male lead."

Chen Shuang He keenly noticed that Qu Yan glanced in the direction of the masked person, then he smiled. "I have been the male lead in many films, I want to take a break for now, to challenge myself with different roles."

"Wow, you're so good!" Zhao Yu Fen looked at him with a look of adoration.

"Not really..." Qu Yan spoke halfway before the masked person suddenly took a step forward and got close to his ear. The lips behind the mask opened and closed, Qu Yan's lips also opened and closed, both of their voices combined into one as they said to Chen Shuang He, "My daughter is already dead, why are you still alive?"

This was a line from the script, but for some reason, when it came out from his mouth, it had a genuine feeling of hatred.

The dance studio fell silent for a while, then Zhao Yu Fen gave Qu Yan's arm a pat. She said with a smile, "Aiya, why are you getting into

the role of the father this quickly?"

"Then are you not calling me Father?" Qu Yan said with laughter, but his eyes were looking in the direction of Chen Shuang He's...back.

What was behind him? What else but another masked person?

How strange. Both of them could see the masked person behind them, but Zhao Yu Fen could not see them, no one else could see them, why was that?

Afterwards, Chen Shuang He tried to look for Qu Yan privately a few times. He tried to discuss this matter in a roundabout manner, what surprised him was how Qu Yan was very resistant and cautious, he seemed to not be willing to talk about it. In the end, he even began to deliberately avoid Chen Shuang He.

"Don't you understand?" Shi Zhong Tang said by Chen Shuang He's ear, "He is but a puppet. Every word he says, everything he does, every friend he makes, everything was not out of his own will, they were instead instigated by the person behind him... He's afraid of you, afraid that you are taking a shortcut like him."

"But you will disappear eventually." Chen Shuang He turned his head back and looked at Shi Zhong Tang. "Once you disappear, the shortcut disappears along with you."

"Yes, I will eventually disappear." Laughter rang out behind Shi Zhong Tang's mask. "But that's not happening now...Little Boy Chen, at least for now, I am standing on your side."

"Why?" Chen Shuang He asked the question that had been on his mind.

"...Let me think." Shi Zhong Tang tilted his head and thought about it. "For the sake of looking good in front of a certain girl?"

...*What kind of a damnable reason is that?* Chen Shuang He originally thought to lower his guard towards the other, but after hearing what the other had to say, he did not know whether to believe him. On the other hand, with Qu Yan expressing displeasure towards him, Chen Shuang He's path to the future was getting more and more difficult.

"The curse of being a child star."

"Insider reveals: There were originally only two male lead substitutes, the extra one that appeared came in through pulled strings."

"Director Chen expressed in an interview that the male lead he

preferred the most is actually Qu Yan."

Can't these tabloids calm down a little!

Chen Shuang He worked hard to shield himself from the news of the outside world, but there was always someone—either intentionally or unintentionally—who would tell him those news.

Public clamor could obscure the truth. Chen Shuang He felt the opinions of the public towards him gradually changed.

The term genius had not been mentioned by anyone for a long time. Instead, terms like "pulling strings", "child star" kept being mentioned repeatedly.

"Mother, are you feeling better? Father is well, I'm...I'm also well." On this day, Chen Shuang He practiced alone late into the night, he called his mother who was laying on her sickbed as he walked down the stairs. "Do you think you could believe what is written in the newspapers? I have quite a good relationship with the crew—especially the female lead Zhao Yu Fen, she treats me very well, she has helped me a lot..."

He stopped speaking all of a sudden as he looked down the stairs.

Although he could not see the people downstairs, he could hear their footsteps along with their conversation.

"Chen Shuang He seems to like you a lot." Qu Yan's voice.

"Really?" Zhao Yu Fen sighed, "But I don't really like him, he is very ill-mannered. Last time, at the dance studio, you offered to shake his hand. Not only did he ignore you, he also put up airs even though he had no ability..."

Chen Shuang He waited for their voices to completely trail off before slowly walking down the stairs.

He walked out from the entrance and looked at the pale moon in the sky, remaining silent for a moment before asking abruptly, "Are my memories real?"

Shi Zhong Tang, "Hmm?"

"Becoming famous at a young age, becoming the movie emperor before the age of thirty, having everyone like me, people recognising me no matter where I go." Chen Shuang He reached out towards the moon. "...Are those memories real?"

The moon looked so close, but it was so far, he reached out his hand but was not able to touch it.

"Sometimes, I think that this world is an illusion. The world is fake, my memory is fake—I, too, am fake." Chen Shuang He retracted his hand and turned his head to look at Shi Zhong Tang. "And you are fake, an illusion created from the huge amount of stress I am experiencing. That I have actually never been a movie emperor, that everything was an illusion, that it was a good dream of mine."

He sighed. "Now it's time to wake up."

Chen Shuang He gave up the thought of going home as he reentered from the entrance. He returned to the dance studio without switching on the lights. He stood alone in the darkness, there were occasional clear liquids flying through the air, which might be his sweats, or it might be his tears.

Suddenly, with a twist of his ankle, he crashed onto the floor. It took a very long while before he turned around and laid flat on his back as he covered his eyes with both his hands.

"Such a silly child." Shi Zhong Tang squatted beside him, looking down at him and smiling. "It's just one role, is there a need to try this hard?"

"What do you know?" Chen Shuang He asked blandly.

"Of course I know. It's not hard to guess what a child like you is thinking," Shi Zhong Tang said with a grin, "you just want me to console you."

"I'm not!!"

"Haha. Wanting to be consoled, wanting your hard work to be acknowledged, wanting to use your ability to change something—those are human nature, there's nothing to be embarrassed about."

Chen Shuang He could not bear it anymore and sat up from the floor. He stared at Shi Zhong Tang and said, "Don't speak as if you know me well!"

"But I do know you very well." Shi Zhong Tang laughed. "Besides, I have to thank you."

Chen Shuang He, "Huh?"

"I know you better than you could imagine, I also know her better than you could imagine." Shi Zhong Tang remained squatting beside him, his eyes slowly looking towards the direction of the tightly shut door. "...I knew it. Looking at your pitiful state, she would not be able to bear it. Because the two of you are very similar. One of you had never had a father, the other might as well not have had a father. Both

of you love your mothers deeply, both of you want your mothers' validation, both of you want to go back in time to change your mothers' tragic fate."

Clop, clop, clop... Footsteps rang out outside the door, getting closer and closer.

"Of course what's most important is that in her heart, every punishment should have a limit. Having your life tampered after sneaking in, that is enough." Shi Zhong Tang gazed at the door and slowly stood up. "She would not watch by as you die, because in the end, you didn't do anything. The person Boss Qu actually hates had long died a hundred years ago... Isn't that right, Ning Ning?"

Ning Ning?

Chen Shuang He followed his vision and looked over.

The door was pushed open silently, a crack gradually grew larger, an indistinguishable figure stood at the doorway.

The lights were not turned on. Chen Shuang He could not make out who she was, but watching the back view of Shi Zhong Tang, he couldn't help but feel that this man had been waiting for this moment.

Crossing time, crossing space, through a different body, hugging the same you.

"I've waited for you for a very long time." Shi Zhong Tang hugged the woman at the doorway, he said gently, "Can you give me a hug, Ning Ning?"

Small Theater:

Shi Tou Ge: "Foolish little brother, let me—your big brother—teach you how to date."

Three Minutes: "I'll leave everything to you, bro."

Little Angel, "No no no no I am your actual little brother! QQ"

Ah Xia: "Oh my God, I realised I've got darker by two shades after going out for work, I can't write pure love again..."

Chapter 131

131: Dance With Me

"..." Ning Ning blinked. She did not speak, she just slowly raised her hands and hugged him.

The two of them were hugging in the darkness for a while.

"Can you give me a kiss as well, Ning Ning?"

"...Don't take advantage of the situation!!"

A cold laugh rang out from a short distance away. Chen Shuang He sat on the floor, looking at them. "What Ning Ning? Isn't that Zhao Yu Fen?"

Although he could not make out her face, he recognised her voice.

It was the female lead for <After Juliet's Death>—Zhao Yu Fen—who had just left while talking and laughing with Qu Yan.

"It's me." The woman at the door looked at him and said, "The person who visited your mother's grave with you. Thanks for your coat, I'll give it back to you after we get out of here."

Chen Shuang He was shocked for a moment. He laughed in spite of himself as he looked down. "What are you talking about? My mother is still alive."

"I'm talking about the future, not now." A pair of red high heels walked up to him, a pair of hands held up his face. In the darkness, a pair of seemingly familiar eyes gazed at him. "Becoming famous at a young age, becoming a movie emperor before the age of thirty. Everyone likes you, people recognising you no matter where you go... These are your future, this is my memory of you."

Chen Shuang He looked at her in a daze. He was lucky that the lights were not turned on, because only then could he cry in an unbridled manner in the darkness.

With a clack, the lights were switched on, catching them off guard.

The two of them were both stunned for a moment. Chen Shuang He turned his face away awkwardly, quickly wiping the tears off his face. He looked at Shi Zhong Tang who was standing beside the light switch with some anger. "What are you doing? Switching the lights on so

suddenly, it hurt my eyes."

"Haha, what a bad excuse." Shi Zhong Tang laughed out loud, he did not let Chen Shuang He keep his dignity at all. "Speaking of, Little Boy Chen, aren't you an actor? If you are an actor, then don't be afraid of standing under the spotlight. Get up!"

"Who says I'm afraid?" Chen Shuang He jumped up from the floor with gritted teeth, his vision shifted towards Ning Ning uncontrollably. He did not understand why he had to look at her, he also did not understand why he wanted to put up a strong front in front of her.

"Becoming famous at a young age, becoming a movie emperor before the age of thirty. Everyone likes you, people recognising you no matter where you go... These are your future, this is my memory of you."

These words made Chen Shuang He feel—Ah, so my memories are real, I am real...you are also real.

"I have already disappointed a lot of people, I'm only left with you, then at the very least...I shall not disappoint you." He looked at Ning Ning as he thought softly. Ning Ning, on the other hand, was looking in the direction of Shi Zhong Tang and saying, "I'm a little late. I have to quickly learn how to dance, otherwise, I will be exposed."

Shi Zhong Tang reached out a hand towards her, beckoning at her with his finger.

"How's your dancing skill?" Ning Ning raised her eyebrows in a picky manner.

"I'm super good at it." Shi Zhong Tang bragged in a serious tone.

The two of them started from the left and right side, walking towards each other, meeting in the middle of the dance studio. Both their footsteps came to a stop, they bowed graciously at each other.

Like Romeo and Juliet's chance meeting at the masked ball, amidst this mortal realm, among the groups of men and women, among the masks, they saw each other and picked each other.

"I'll leave it to you." Ning Ning placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Just leave it to me." Shi Zhong Tang laughed as he placed his hand on her waist.

The two person ball began.

Their dance steps were like a couple in love chasing each other, the mirrors that surrounded the room reflected their dancing figures, her

scarlet dress was like an ignited passion, swirling in the air, and as it swirled...the image changed. From night to day, the mirrors surrounding the dance studio now reflected the dancing figures of Ning Ning and Chen Shuang He, their dance steps sped up, till finally the scarlet dress swirled in the air slowly.

After the music stopped, Director Chen clapped, "Very good."

"You improved very quickly." He looked towards Chen Shuang He and cracked a rare smile. When he looked at Ning Ning, his expression was almost freezing cold. "You deteriorated quite a bit, have you been slacking off?"

"I'm sorry, Director Chen." Ning Ning looked down. In the span of three days, she could only achieve this level. After all, she was an actress, not a professional dancer, she did not have Zhao Yu Fen's ten years of dancing experience. If she were to shoot a movie with Director Chen, she could only rely on her acting skills to make up for it.

After reprimanding Ning Ning, Director Chen called the other two male lead substitutes over. He sized them up slowly and said, "The time allotted for dance practice is almost over, you know what that means right?"

The three male lead substitutes stole glances at each other. Of course they knew what that meant, it meant that—the male lead was about to be born.

"All of you have worked hard in this period of time, I have taken note of that." Director Chen laughed. "As for the choice of male lead, I already have someone in mind. You don't have to be depressed if you aren't chosen, the second and third male roles have been reserved for you, they are also very good characters."

His words slightly eased the tension between the three of them. After all, Director Chen's works were all top quality. Not only would the male and female lead gain popularity, the other supporting roles would also gain popularity along with them.

After appeasing them, Director Chen shot a glance at Ning Ning. "Follow me."

Chen Shuang He was taken aback. Just as he was about to say something, Ning Ning secretly waved her hand at him, then followed behind Director Chen.

The two of them left the dance studio and entered the rest area. Director Chen quickly turned around and told her bluntly, "I want to

switch you out."

Ning Ning was not surprised. Because he was a strict and practical person, if one could not meet his expectations, then they would be abandoned heartlessly, even if they were his biological son.

"The filming is about to start, changing actors now would be very troublesome."

That was what Ning Ning thought, but she was not the one who had said it. The two of them looked over to the voice. They watched as a person got up from the sofa, looking like he had just woken up. He seemed to have been taking a nap here before they had arrived—a handsome look similar to Chen Shuang He's facial features, it was Qu Yan.

Boss Qu bent down and said something in his ear. He repeated the words with a smile like a voice recorder, "Why not give her another chance?"

"Chance?" Director Chen had no patience for mediocre people. On the contrary, he would always give special treatment to geniuses. He smiled and asked, "What kind of chance do you think I should give her?"

Qu Yan looked towards Ning Ning, or more accurately, Boss Qu—who was behind Qu Yan—looked towards Ning Ning.

"How about trying out a scene?" Qu Yan stared at Ning Ning. This was, after all, a movie. Although dancing was important, acting skill was more important.

"Let me think...let's try this part." Boss Qu stared at Ning Ning. Like a puppeteer behind the curtain, manipulating the puppet strings in his hands, controlling the limbs and mouth of the puppet. "Juliet's father found out that his beloved daughter was actually already seeing his enemy's son behind his back."

An improvisation, they would have free reign over it. The name of the scene would temporarily be < <Father's Rage> > .

The location would be right there at the rest area.

Qu Yan rolled off the sofa. He walked towards Ning Ning with a smile, but when he was halfway towards Ning Ning, the smile on his face froze, because Boss Qu walked past him and stood in front of Ning Ning.

There was an open window on the wall. The two of them were standing in front of the window, white light shone in from outside,

illuminating everything inside, except for Boss Qu.

"Why?" Boss Qu asked. His voice was very quiet, underneath the quiet hid his seething rage.

Qu Yan who was behind him took a look at him before frantically repeating after him, "Why?"

"Papa..." Ning Ning's had a panicked expression—the expression of someone getting caught red-handed by a parent.

"Out of all the men in the world, why must you choose the one I hate the most?" Boss Qu asked.

Ning Ning looked down. She eased her expression before slowly looking up at him. "The person you hate is his grandfather, not him. He was still young when it happened, he doesn't even know what had happened, let alone doing anything..."

"It doesn't matter." Boss Qu interrupted her. He said coldly, "No matter if it was his grandfather, his father or him...I hate them, I hate everyone in their family!"

Once he finished his words, he caressed her face gently and dotingly, as if trying to curry her favour. He said, "Pick another one, one that Papa does not hate as much, treat it...treat it as showing pity to your father."

He was so sad, it made Ning Ning feel sad as well.

Life Theater gave her two choices, either of the choices would make her feel pain and sadness, but she could not not pick. Because, other than her, who else could stop Boss Qu?

"Papa, can you really not let it go?" Ning Ning said to him, "The person you truly hate, he's already dead..."

The ancestor of the Chen family, Chen Jun Yan, had long died a hundred of years ago.

Boss Qu looked down as if he was thinking of something, then, under Ning Ning's look of expectation, he suddenly laughed.

"Heh heh, heh heh heh heh..." Boss Qu slowly looked up. He asked her while laughing, "Then what about the person I truly love? Is she alive, or is she already dead?"

Ning Ning was stunned.

"Tell me," Boss Qu took a step towards her. There seemed to be a trace of tear flowing behind the snow white mask, "that she's still

alive..."

Tell me that she did not—along with my nemesis—die a hundred years ago.

Tell me that I am not the only one who remembers the hatred of the murder of my daughter those years ago, that she remembers it as well, that she is still standing by my side...

Tell me that you are her, my daughter...

"Cut!" Director Chen suddenly shouted, then he quickly got up and walked towards Ning Ning with rosy cheeks, gesticulating in a deranged manner that would make one want to call the police. He pressed on Ning Ning's shoulder and said, "The female lead is you! It has to be you! It must be you! Ah! I have to edit this part in the script. Li Shan Zhu, Li Shan Zhu!!"

"I'll help you get him." Qu Yan wiped the sweat on his forehead, then shot a look at Boss Qu, indicating for the latter to follow him.

This might be the first time Boss Qu had shed the role of a shadow and did something without his consent. Qu Yan was fearful and exasperated, he wanted to look for a place to have a good talk with him.

Ning Ning was being pestered by Director Chen. She looked back at Boss Qu and shouted, "Wait..."

Boss Qu stopped in his tracks before leaving resolutely. Ning Ning watched in a daze as he left; she knew that unless she chased after him, he would not stop, his hatred would not stop for anyone.

"Scenes could be added for the father role." Director Chen was rubbing his chin by the side, rambling, "Just like he said, he will not forgive anyone in the family, including the male lead and his father..."

Indeed, he would not forgive anyone in the Chen family.

Ning Ning slowly turned her head to look at Director Chen, thinking, that was why Boss Qu was in this movie—to deal with you, along with Chen Shuang He!

Chapter 132

132: Nurturing Someone into a Lover

"Director Chen?" Shi Zhong Tang said with a laugh. "It is unlikely that he would go so far to implicate him.."

When she returned from Director Chen's side, Ning Ning immediately looked for Shi Zhong Tang, telling him her worries and asking for his opinion.

"Boss Qu is both the doorman and the executioner; whichever identity he assumes, he cannot go against the rules of the theater." Shi Zhong Tang pushed a cup of coffee on the table forward towards Ning Ning. "Don't worry."

That was my cup of coffee. Chen Shuang He glared at him, he had no choice but to pour a new cup of coffee for himself. He held it in his hands like a small animal protecting its food as he continued to eavesdrop on their conversation brazenly, trying his best to digest the information in the conversation.

"Is that so?" Ning Ning took the cup of coffee and had a sip.

"That's right. If there is an accident in filming this time, then no matter if it was dying by poison, getting crushed by a chandelier, or getting run over by a husky etc... No matter what, no one else would be dying." Shi Zhong Tang pointed his finger and made the gesture of firing a gun, aiming at Chen Shuang He and saying 'bang'. "No one else but you, Little Chen Boy."

The two of them spat out coffee at the same time. *Cough, cough, cough.* In the end, he still had to die?!!

"I was just joking." Shi Zhong Tang said while grinning mischievously. "The executioner's mission is to change the past of the stowaway, to make a mess of their past...but he cannot kill them."

"The saviour does the opposite?" Ning Ning asked with a frown, "There's bound to be a winner and loser between those two, is there a punishment for the loser?"

"There isn't." Shi Zhong Tang said.

Upon hearing that, Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief. She suddenly saw Director Chen wave at her from a distance, thus she got

up and said, "Director Chen is calling for me, I'll be going over."

It was after she was a distance away that Chen Shuang He heard Shi Zhong Tang laugh in a low voice, "...As if."

Chen Shuang He turned his head to look at him. Shi Zhong Tang still had his regular happy-go-lucky look, it seemed like if you were to take his mask off, you would see a smiling face with curved eyebrows. For some reason, something felt vaguely off, but if you want to point out what it was specifically, Chen Shuang He could not do it...

"Cut."

A few days later, filming started. It went smoothly at first, but when they reached the part where Juliet was met with an unfortunate car accident while eloping, for the sake of avoiding her father's rage, Romeo deployed manpower to find a girl who looked exactly like Juliet—Director Chen started to shout 'cut' incessantly.

"That take wasn't done well enough." Director Chen furrowed his brows. He seemed to be unable to point out exactly where it wasn't done well, all he did was to repeat a word, "Retake."

Chen Shuang He took a deep breath as he sat on the sofa, smartly dressed. He turned open the book in his hand and said gently, "Come in."

The door opened, a woman's pair of legs walked to his side in a timid manner.

This was the tenth woman who had been sent to him, the nine before her had all disappointed him, he did not hold much hope this time either. He took a look at her once he finished reading a page of the book, then he could not look away anymore.

Ning Ning was wearing a set of dusty clothes, dressed up like a greengrocer. She was used to walking through the dirty back alleys, being in such a bright and clean place, she did not know where to place her arms and legs for the moment, just standing there made her so nervous that the tip of her nose started sweating. Just as she raised her hand to wipe it, a hand reached out in front of her and grabbed her hand.

Chen Shuang He pulled her arm down to take a good look at her face. After a moment, he smiled with satisfaction. "Very well, you're it."

"Cut."

That annoying sound rang out again, Ning Ning looked towards the

direction of the sound. She saw that Director Chen was still frowning, so before he could tell them to redo it, she said to him, "Director Chen, let the two of us take a break and discuss among ourselves how to go about this scene."

They had been stuck at this scene for more than ten tries. Director Chen thought about it before he said, "Sure, take a fifteen minute break... Get over there and touch up on their makeup."

The makeup artist frantically went up to them to touch up their makeup. While their makeup was being done, Chen Shuang He closed his eyes and remained silent, his silence akin to that of depression. This was not how Ning Ning remembered him. The movie emperor in her memory was always brimming with confidence, because he had never failed in his life...

He wouldn't be like this, his performance getting affected by his worries.

Let's give him a hint, Ning Ning thought.

"You're Romeo now, Juliet is the person you love the most." She walked to Chen Shuang He's side and said to him, "After the person you love the most died, a person who looks exactly like her appears right in front of you. Even if you know it wasn't her, but by association, you would not be able to help but treat her well, you would wish that you could give her everything..."

Upon saying that, Ning Ning was abruptly dazed, she quickly turned around and looked in a direction.

Qu Yan was standing a short distance away, talking and laughing to the people around, behind him was Boss Qu who was intently looking at her.

"Is that how you feel too?" Ning Ning asked in her heart.

"...I understand now." Chen Shuang He's voice suddenly rang out. Ning Ning turned her head around and saw that he had opened his eyes and was looking at her, his voice was that of thankfulness and reliance. "Let's try again."

"A!"

"Come in."

Ning Ning entered in a timid manner. Chen Shuang He did not even look at her, he continued to read the book in his hand. The two of them repeated the scene from before. It was only when Chen Shuang He looked up at her that everything went on differently from before.

Chen Shuang He abruptly jumped up off his seat, the book slid off from his legs and hit the floor with a thud. He held Ning Ning's hand. Unable to restrain himself, he pulled her up to him to get a closer look. Once he did, he frantically let go of her hand and took a few steps back in a slightly flustered manner, swallowing his saliva and sneaking a peek at her.

He stole glances at first, then he stared at her. Ning Ning thought that there was something on her face because of how he was looking at her, she awkwardly raised her hand to rub her face, but he grabbed her wrist lightly.

He gently pulled her hand down. The face in front of him, he could not get enough of it no matter how much he looked at it. He opened his mouth, almost calling out the name 'Juliet', but as those words reached his lips he suddenly woke up, saying with bitterness and loneliness instead, "...Very well, you're it."

"Cut."

The two of them turned over and took a look. Director Chen nodded with satisfaction. "It passed."

The filming afterwards went very smoothly. When they were done with filming—while they were on the way back to the hotel—Ning Ning looked at Chen Shuang He with a slightly strange look, "You got it right away, you really are a genius."

She was kind of jealous, because she was not as capable. Because of that, she went through a lot of hardships. She had to step into Life Theater time after time, to turn into a person in the movie time after time, to experience the different lives one by one, lives that were bitter or beautiful.

Chen Shuang He started to emanate haki. As an invisible man who had not been praised by anyone in years, he swelled up with a sweet feeling, as if someone had stuffed a candy in his mouth. The corners of his mouth could not help but try to curl up, but he held firm—thanks to his superior acting skills. He dodged her eyes for a moment before he looked at Ning Ning without confidence. "It's not good enough, can you give me more guidance?"

...Can you look at me more, talk to me more?

"I have nothing to teach you." Ning Ning was astonished, she smiled. "...I'm still in need of guidance myself."

Originally, Chen Shuang He thought that she was looking at him, he finally could not help but curl up the corner of his lips. After a

while, the corners of his lips slowly curved downwards. He looked in the direction she was looking—as expected, he saw a jade mask with the corner of its eyes dashed with a peach coloured stroke.

She was not looking at him, but the person behind him.

Chen Shuang He did not know where the sour feeling in his heart came from, that sweet in his mouth...had to have a special five-kernel filling¹! It would only taste sweet for a moment before it let him taste the five other flavours.

After he returned to his hotel room, he entered the bathroom and turned on the sink. He bent down and splashed a handful of water on his face.

The wave of coldness made him slightly calmer. He slowly looked up with his face that was dripping wet as he asked, "...What exactly is your relationship with her?"

The mirror in front of him reflected his still dripping face, behind him, however, was completely empty.

Chen Shuang He rapidly turned around and took a look. "...Shi Zhong Tang?"

He looked around his room, abruptly pulling his curtain open. He saw that amidst the crowd, there was a masked person who clearly stood out. Coincidentally, he looked back, waving at Chen Shuang He.

"...Where are you leaving me to?!!" Chen Shuang He immediately rushed out of the room. He used Foshan Shadowless Finger² to mash the elevator button. The elevator door opened with a ding, it then sent him downstairs. Once the door opened, he rushed out with lightning fast speed to chase after the figure in front of him, following him all the way to the exterior of the dance studio.

"Huff, huff, huff..." Chen Shuang He was a little tired from running, he took a moment to catch his breath at the door. Just as he was about to push the door and go in, he suddenly heard Ning Ning's voice coming out from within the room with a trace of bitterness. "...Chen Shuang He is the genius, not me."

"Come on, what are you angry about?" Shi Zhong Tang laughed. "Don't tell me...you're jealous of him?"

"I'm not!"

Chen Shuang He was taken aback. He gently opened a crack in the door then hid behind it to peep at them.

The two of them seemed to have planned this meeting. They sat on the floor in front of each other, a copy of the script was placed in between them. Shi Zhong Tang pulled Ning Ning up to his side and said, "I can't see it clearly if it's upside down, come over here and read together with me."

"Don't toy with me." Ning Ning said coldly, "You've already looked through it once...you've already memorised it, right?"

Shi Zhong Tang blinked a couple of times and shrugged his shoulders. If he could, he would take off his mask and stick out his tongue. Seeing that Ning Ning was unmoved, he could only slump his shoulders. "Alright, you saw through me."

"...You are a genius too." Ning Ning was even more bitter. "I'm the only lowly mortal."

Shi Zhong Tang slowly got closer to her. "...I am the genius who has been captured by you."

Ning Ning suddenly turned her head. The two of them were too close to each other, she gave him a kiss that was separated by a mask.

After a moment of silence, Ning Ning suddenly held up the script to cover her face and said, "*Cough*, since you have memorised it, let's begin."

"Ning Ning, I can't see your face." Shi Zhong Tang tilted his head and looked at her. "You're a little sly, doing that."

"What choice do I have? I'm also desperate." Ning Ning continued to hold up the script. "I'm but a lowly mortal, I have not memorised the lines, I have to act while looking at the script!"

Shi Zhong Tang looked down and laughed for a moment, then got up and took two steps. His voice turned cold with his back to her, "Come in."

The scene that was repeated for more than ten times in the morning was repeated again in the dance studio.

Chen Shuang He watched from the door for a while. It then dawned on him, Shi Zhong Tang was actually an actor.

A far superior...genius actor.

His acting was very natural, be it the grasp of the character or the measure of his expressions, Shi Zhong Tang did not make a single mistake. The degree of the accuracy of his acting skills was a little scary to Chen Shuang He, because his perfection would infinitely

magnify the imperfections of the people sharing the screen with him.

In other words, people who were not good enough would have no right to share the screen with him at all, otherwise, they would just be asking for humiliation.

Shi Zhong Tang leaned on the window, the night view fanned out behind him, the darkness without edge was like wings that he spread out. He exuded an indescribable demeanour, it made any place he stood on to be the center of the stage, it made him the focus of everyone's sight. He played around with the paper box in his hand for a while before he gently took out a piece of sweet. He reached out towards Ning Ning and ordered her gently, "Eat."

Ning Ning swallowed and reached out with both her hands to grab the sweet, but he raised the sweet higher, unwilling to give it to her.

"I told you to eat." Shi Zhong Tang said lightly, "I didn't tell you to take it."

The sweet was sent to the side of her mouth. She looked at the sweet then at him. Finally, with quivering lips, she carefully bit the sweet out of his fingers. Although she was already very careful, her lips still touched his fingers while she didn't notice.

He retracted his hand expressionlessly, it was impossible to tell whether he was angry. He stared at her lips for a while before he said, "Now, smile."

Ning Ning frantically squeezed a smile out.

"Tsk, ts, you scared me." Shi Zhong Tang said with a look of disgust. He took another sweet out of the box and fed her. "Juliet is like this piece of sweet. When you smile, you have to be as sweet as the sweet in your mouth."

She ate sweets for one moment, smiling at him at the next moment. After he fed her about ten pieces of sweets, Shi Zhong Tang suddenly thought of something, "That's right, after Juliet has eaten sweets, she would always kiss me saying she wants me to have a taste."

After he finished speaking, he smiled and got closer, but Ning Ning pushed him in the chest.

"What are you doing? " She was a little exasperated and a little flustered. "Isn't this getting too real?"

"Oh, you are acting?" Shi Zhong Tang blinked. "I wasn't."

Ning Ning was confused. She looked down at the script in her

hands, then looked up in exasperation. "You are toying with me again. What do you mean by Juliet would always want to kiss after eating a sweet...there's no such line in the script at all!"

"There is such a line in my heart." Shi Zhong Tang got up to her and kissed her from behind the mask. "I want to know what my Juliet tastes like."

There was a crack in the doorway, this scene was reflected into Chen Shuang He's eyes through the crack.

"This Juliet, is she my Juliet...or his Juliet?" He could not help but think, "Am I Romeo, or a substitute for Romeo?"

1A type of filling in mooncakes which is a Chinese bakery product traditionally eaten during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

2A variation of a famous martial arts move the .

Chapter 133

133: Deception

A few days later, at the filming location.

"Juliet." Chen Shuang He waited a while before turning his head and said, "I mean you."

It was then that Ning Ning seemed to come back to her senses. As she exclaimed, she walked over to him in small steps with a cup of coffee in hand.

Chen Shuang He looked at her, she was having a slightly dazed expression. He waited for the steam from the coffee to gradually dissipate before waving his hand, "You can't even convince me, how do you expect to deceive Juliet's father?"

The cup fell on the floor due to his hand wave, it shattered. Ning Ning knelt down as she tried to pick up the pieces, but he pulled her off the floor, his brows were creased tightly as he said unhappily, "What are you doing?"

"The floor is dirty, I, I'll clean it up." Ning Ning kept her head low, seeming to be slightly afraid of him.

Chen Shuang He let out a laugh. He pinched her chin and pulled her face up bit by bit as he said to her gently, "You are Juliet, a lady who grows up with a golden spoon in her mouth. This is something only servants would do, when would you ever need to do this?"

"I'm sorry..." Just as those two words left her mouth, Chen Shuang He threw her viciously onto the floor, the gentleness from before was nowhere to be seen now. He looked down at her with an extremely cold expression.

"You have to meet Juliet's father the day after tomorrow." Chen Shuang He said coldly, "If you couldn't deceive him, I would have to die; but I wouldn't die alone, I would bring you along with me."

"Cut." Director Chen waved his hand, "Very good, next scene."

A movie would not be shot completely according to the script's order, the order would be jumbled up sometimes. Originally, there were still a few more scenes of Romeo training fake Juliet, but due to the filming location being further away, Director Chen temporarily left

them out for now. They would first film the scene of the fake Juliet deceiving the father.

The location switched from the living room to a girl's bedroom. Although the owner had left for a very long time, the room had been kept very clean. As it was three in the afternoon—time for afternoon tea—a pot of red tea was placed on the table, along with a snack stand of macarons, tiramisu, doughnuts etc.

The tea had already gone cold, the snacks had yet to be touched, a man who was all white on the temples was sitting by the table with his back to Ning Ning, like he was waiting for a certain person to return.

A pair of hands slowly reached out behind him, covering his eyes. Ning Ning sang to the tune of an opera, "Guess who I am?"

The man's lips trembled a little, he started to sing. When he sang, Boss Qu also sang behind him, a familiar republic tune. "It's a princess of the Qing dynasty, a fairy who had fallen from heaven, a peony in the mortal realm..."

Boss Qu slowly turned his head and looked at her. "...It's the most beautiful girl in the world, my daughter."

Ning Ning slowly put her hands down, her fingers were already wet with tears, Qu Yan looked at her with teary eyes. Who was the person who put the makeup on him? Why...did they make him look so much like Boss Qu?

He slowly stood up from the chair, as he slowly stood up, the surroundings seemed to transform, turning into the room of a young lady from the Republican Era¹. They were surrounded by wooden four-part wardrobes², in which modern *cheongsams* were hung, each one was of the latest design of the time, made with the best materials.

There was an imported blonde doll on the table, its clear blue eyes reflected their hugging figures.

"Papa knows, Papa has always known." A Qu Yan who looked almost exactly like Boss Qu was hugging Ning Ning, murmuring in her ear, "You didn't die, you will definitely come back to Papa's side..."

In the following days, fake Juliet was seemingly dizzy from everything the real's father gave her. He loved her so much he wished he could put the entire world in the box, tie it up with a butterfly knot and give it to her.

Until one day, Romeo called her over, giving her a pill and saying,

"Put this in the pill bottle he usually takes."

Ning Ning was aghast. She dropped the pill, it then rolled onto the table. She frantically waved her hands around. "No, no, killing is illegal, I cannot help you kill him."

Chen Shuang He picked up the pill from the table and took a look at her. Suddenly, he tossed the pill in his mouth and chewed a few times. He opened his mouth and let out a laughter, the sweet aroma of a confection spread from his mouth. "Heh heh, I was joking. How could I make you kill someone?"

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief, but what she didn't know was that this was a bargaining chip, what he mentioned later on was what he actually wanted her to do.

"I don't want you to kill him with your own hands." Chen Shuang He said while he laughed, "All I want is for you to not call anyone or give him his medicine when his illness is triggered, just watch."

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment. "Illness?"

Juliet's father had a heart related disease, he would always have a small pill bottle on him. Once he noticed the symptom of his illness, he would immediately take the medicine. Just in case, the secretary also had a bottle, her daughter also had a bottle, this could be equated to three layers of insurance, an accident would definitely never happen.

However, in this world, as long as there were calculative people, then there would be no definite insurances.

The location changed to the inside of a conference room. On the left was Chen Shuang He, on the right was Qu Yan, one of them old, the other young, they were all set for a showdown. What they were about to discuss was not the allocation of shares, change of assets, or ten million worth of business, but...

"I'll give you ten million, leave my daughter." Qu Yan said coldly.

"Why don't you let me marry Juliet and I'll give you ten million." Chen Shuang He said with a laughter.

Qu Yan let out a cold laugh. "Where would you get ten million? Your father has three sons, you are the most useless and fickle, you are not capable of getting married legally at all, all you know is to tempt people to elope with you."

Having said that, his expression grew cold. He looked at Chen Shuang He as if he was looking at a mortal enemy. "...You didn't even

protect her properly, she almost died!"

Chen Shuang He fell silent for a moment before he said, "I will take good care of her in the future. Besides, I have already established a company..."

"Would having a company guarantee that you make money?" Boss Qu laughed out loud, mocking him mercilessly. "I know what you are thinking. You are not thought of highly in your family because you have too many siblings. Seeing that I have only one daughter, you are trying to take advantage of her by marrying her to let me support you in the future..."

Chen Shuang He clenched his fists, raging as if he had been wronged, but it also looked like he was panicking because someone had seen through him.

"I cannot rest assured with you." Qu Yan stared at him and said, "Marry into the family, let me keep an eye on you, only this way could I let my daughter marry without worries—Urgh!"

He abruptly held his chest, his expression was twisted from the pain. He felt around his body for a moment but could not find his medicine. The colour of his complexion changed. He turned his head to look at the secretary beside him, trying to catch his breath. "Quick! Medicine, medicine..."

The secretary took out a pill bottle from their pocket, then smiled apologetically. "I forgot to bring it with me too."

Qu Yan's eyes widened. He watched as they opened the window and threw the bottle out, then returned to the conference table, returned to...Chen Shuang He's side.

"You..." Qu Yan stared at them with surprise and rage. "You two..."

Chen Shuang He crossed his arms as he looked at Qu Yan with a smile.

Qu Yan glared at him for a moment. He swiftly helped himself up using the table and stumbled as he ran to the entrance.

The door was opened, a person was standing across from him, long hair was draped on her body, a simple and elegant face, a sixty-point beauty in the eyes of others, but she was a hundred-point daughter to him.

"Don't forget what you promised me before." Chen Shuang He's voice rang out behind him, "Don't call anyone, don't give him medicine, just watch."

Ning Ning had a complicated expression on her face, she watched as the man in front of her fell upon her feet bit by bit.

The father who was already white on the temples was laying on his side on the floor, he looked up at her, his eyes had insurmountable pain in them.

"Say something to him." Chen Shuang He sat by the conference table. With victory in his grasp, he prompted Ning Ning to give him the final blow.

"Your death will be beneficial to everyone, it will be beneficial to me too..." Ning Ning followed his order and recited the lines he had prepared for her beforehand. Halfway through, tears suddenly started streaming down like rain. "No, you cannot die."

She knelt down and brought Qu Yan into her arms, then amidst the angry shouts of Chen Shuang He, she quickly opened the pill bottle in her hand and poured the medicine into Qu Yan's mouth.

"You bitch! What did you do—urgh!" Chen Shuang He rushed over in rage, but halfway through, he suddenly grabbed his chest, vomiting blood.

Blood spurted out on the floor, it was black and red.

The crew went crazy in a short span of time. Countless pairs of legs ran past Ning Ning as they rushed towards Chen Shuang He who was being helped up by the secretary.

Ning Ning looked at him in a daze for an instant before turning her head to look at the person standing beside her.

No words were needed, she used her expression to accuse him. *You did it?*

Boss Qu looked at her. He actually used a line from the movie to answer her, "His death will be beneficial to everyone, it will be beneficial to you too..."

"...No! He cannot die!" Ning Ning quickly took out her phone and called the hospital.

The ambulance arrived and sent Chen Shuang He to the hospital for gastric lavage. Not long after the test results were out, it shook up everyone in the crew.

"What did you say?" Director Chen asked with a frown, "He was poisoned?"

The poison was placed in a cup of coffee. How could that be

possible? The coffee was brewed with a single pot, two cups were used as props, placed on the left and right side of the conference table. Qu Yan was fine after drinking it but Chen Shuang He was poisoned? Under the eyes of everyone, who had poisoned it? Who had the capability to poison it? Spider-Man? Or an invisible man?

Ning Ning knew who had the capability.

She took a good opportunity to leave and look for Qu Yan. Although she found him, she was not able to find Boss Qu. Where did he go? She looked for him for a long time before she finally walked past a door that was ajar, hearing familiar voices coming from within.

"You are making things very difficult for me." Shi Zhong Tang said lazily, "Must you go against me?"

Boss Qu let out a cold laughter, as if he thought of nothing of the other.

"Actually, going against me is not a big deal." Shi Zhong Tang said, "But going against the theater is kind of seeking death. Father-in-law, have you forgotten? You have no rights to kill him."

"Don't call me Father-in-law." Boss Qu said in a deep voice.

"Father-in-law. Father-in-law. Father-in-law." Shi Zhong Tang said it three consecutive times instead, saying as he grinned mischievously, "Since you insist on seeking death, before you die, can you write up a will? Entrust your daughter to me."

Boss Qu, "...Get lost."

The door suddenly opened, Ning Ning was standing at the doorway. She was a little late so she did not hear what they were talking about earlier, all she heard was the frivolous toned "write up a will, entrust your daughter to me", the corner of her mouth twitched as she asked, "What were you two discussing?"

The two of them were surprised. They exchanged looks before Boss Qu spoke out, "We were talking about Chen Shuang He."

Ning Ning closed the door so that outsiders would not see her and think that she was talking to the (empty) air.

"What about him?" Ning Ning asked.

"...I just want him to suffer a little, to stay in the hospital for a few days." Boss Qu answered.

"Is that really how it is?" Ning Ning walked closer and stared at him, "You just want him to suffer a little, not to kill him?"

Boss Qu did not know how long she had been listening for, but seeing that the only thing she asked about after coming in was Chen Shuang He and not himself, he could not help but get a little angry. He said coldly, "What if I say no?"

Ning Ning was stupefied.

"If either one of us must die." Boss Qu was the one who asked the overbearing question now. "Whose death...would make you less sad?"

1The Republic of China (ROC), commonly known as China, was a sovereign state based in mainland China between 1912 and 1949, prior to the relocation of its government to the island of Taiwan.

2Below is an example of a this specific type of the wardrobe

Chapter 134

134: Fake Goods

It was a very-hard-to-answer question. Ning Ning hesitated for a very long time. Just as she was about to answer, a hand reached out across from her, Boss Qu stopped her. "Hold it...think about it carefully before you answer me."

After that, he quickly walked out of the room, the view of his back looked like someone who was escaping.

As it turned out, he was also afraid to hear the answer.

Although the culprit was yet to be found, Director Chen suppressed the incident and said that Chen Shuang He ate something that did not sit well with his stomach. The filming continued.

Without the male lead, the shot naturally shifted towards the others. In the following days, they primarily filmed the scenes between fake Juliet and her father.

Previously, after his illness had acted up in the conference room, although fake Juliet had saved him in the end, she had also given herself away a little.

Juliet's Father started to suspect the authenticity of this daughter.

"A!"

"Father." Ning Ning entered the room, her eyes were darting around a little. "You're looking for me?"

Qu Yan closed the newspaper. "The weather is pretty good today, let's go for a walk."

The person who helped him up was a new face, he had already gotten rid of the original secretary. Chen Shuang He could not fend for himself, not to mention the secretary. The last time Ning Ning saw the secretary was on the streets, they were in rags, holding a bowl as they begged.

The two of them went out, sitting inside the car. After the car started driving for some time, Ning Ning asked, "Papa, where are we going?"

"To the hospital." Qu Yan said.

Ning Ning shuddered, she forced a smile. "Didn't you go to the hospital yesterday for a check up? Why are you going again?"

Qu Yan looked at her with a complicated expression.

The smile slowly disappeared from Ning Ning's face, she asked quietly, "...Is it a paternity test?"

The two of them did not speak for the rest of the way. As they got closer and closer to the hospital, Qu Yan's chest was puffing more and more violently. Just as the car was about to stop at the hospital's entrance, he suddenly yelled, "We're not going anymore! Turn back! Turn back!"

Ning Ning turned her head abruptly and looked at him.

Pulling out at the last minute, he was also afraid of the truth.

"Cut!" Director Chen shouted, "Very good, it passed."

During break time, Ning Ning looked for Director Chen. "Director Chen, since we're already here, I want to go over and visit Chen Shuang He."

She pointed at the hospital room across. Coincidentally, Chen Shuang He was accepting treatment in the same hospital.

"You're unexpectedly caring towards him." Director Chen laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not planning to substitute him. I called the hospital yesterday, he's recovering well, he can come back and continue filming tomorrow."

He only called the hospital, he did not visit him personally.

At that moment, Ning Ning started to really suspect that Chen Shuang He was actually a stepchild.

Later on, Ning Ning still had to wait for the filming of the day to end before she could find the time to visit Chen Shuang He. Thanks to the fact that the two of them were small time actors, there was only one reporter snooping around, there was not a single enthusiastic fan visiting.

Ning Ning sat in the ward and said to Chen Shuang He, "From now on, you cannot leave my side."

Chen Shuang He was eating an apple at the moment, he choked upon hearing those words. He pounded his chest a few times and swallowed the apple with great difficulty, coughing twice and looking at her while feeling flustered. "...What are you saying all of a sudden?"

"The masked man behind Qu Yan." Ning Ning was worried that he was not clear on the gravity of the situation, she told him bluntly, "He wants to kill you."

Chen Shuang He was dumbfounded. He was a smart person, he put two and two together and asked, "The person who poisoned me was him?"

Ning Ning nodded her head.

"Why?" Chen Shuang He was puzzled. "I don't even know him...did Qu Yan put him up to it?"

From his point of view, the two of them didn't even know each other, there was no hatred nor grudge. On the contrary, Qu Yan gave him a lot of unhappiness...this man who had appeared out of nowhere took all of the roles that were originally his, made acquaintances with everyone he was originally acquainted with, taking all the spots that he originally had. The fake had ascended the throne, the rightful owner had been shoved to the side instead. If you were talking about grudge, Chen Shuang He definitely held a grudge, if you were talking about hatred, if Qu Yan was deliberate in his action, then they definitely had hatred towards each other.

But Ning Ning shook her head. "Let me tell you a story."

Now that it had come to this, she did not want to hide anymore. She told him the story of the first time she stepped into Life Theater—the disturbing incidents, the joys and sorrows of the movie—they came out of her mouth and became a story. Within less than half an hour, she had finished it.

"...When I realised that I had transmigrated into a movie, I was thrilled to bits. I felt that it was a place God has given me to hone my acting skills. I started acting as the republic period lady I had transmigrated as, relying on the love of her father, willful and reckless, arbitrary and tyrannical." Ning Ning let out a helpless laugh at Chen Shuang He. "After that, I got into character."

"Got into character?" Chen Shuang He furrowed his brows.

"You are also an actor, you know the impact of getting into character on an actor, especially for an actor who got into character for the first time." Ning Ning nodded. "In that period of time, I was a completely different person. Even till now, I am still unable to completely shed the effect of that movie... No, that was not a movie at all. Afterwards, I found out that what I had transmigrated into was not a movie at all. The movie was real, the people in the movie were real

too. Through Life Theater, I had returned to the past."

Chen Shuang He wanted to call bullshit, but if her story was bullshit, then what was his story?

The current him, didn't he also return to his past through Life Theater?

"That person definitely is guilty of the most heinous crimes, but I can only get him to confess to his crimes. If you want me to kill him...I won't be able to do it." Ning Ning said slowly, "It's the same for you. I really disliked you in the past, you disliked me too. But no matter how poor our relationship was, if you wanted me to watch as he put you to death...I couldn't do that."

Chen Shuang He lowered his head, avoiding her gaze for a moment before he hemmed and hawed. "That was the past, the relationship we have now is not bad."

Ning Ning was taken aback. Before she could say anything, a cold voice suddenly rang out behind her.

"Is that your choice?"

Ning Ning's face turned pale. She turned her head to see a scalpel as bright as snow.

"Watch out!" Shi Zhong Tang's voice rang out outside the door. He seemed to have just gone out and returned to see what was happening inside. He conveniently grabbed the rice box that was in the hands of an older woman beside him and threw it straight in front of him.

The rice box smashed Boss Qu's arm and made him lose his grip on the scalpel.

The older woman first watched her rice box fly away, then she looked at a floating scalpel that was slowly getting closer to her, prompting her to shout, "Ghost!"

After shouting, her eyes rolled over and she fainted.

She was not the only person there to deliver food to the hospital. Some of the few other older women who had seen what had happened screamed like fancy sopranos, others threw their rice boxes and ran away. Seeing that the situation was getting more and more chaotic and that there were more and more people rushing over, Boss Qu *hmpf*-ed coldly, threw the scalpel away and walked out of the door amidst the chaos.

Shi Zhong Tang breathed a sigh of relief. He did not stop Boss Qu

as he gave way to him, then looked back at the two people behind him.

"Who's going to give me an explanation?" He pointed towards the doorway. "Why did this fellow suddenly fly off the handle?"

The hospital was not peaceful at night. Although the doctors and nurses had tried their best to talk about scientific facts to the patients and their families, a few older women still could not rest easy. They had a few monks over for consecutive nights, saying that they wanted to bless their sons' ward.

After the discharge paperwork was done, Ning Ning and Chen Shuang He saw such a scene just as they left. Chen Shuang He asked her under his breath, "Should we get the WeChat of these masters? We can exorcise those two later."

"Exorcise my ass." Ning Ning answered him, "It's the age of science, masked people are not even ghosts."

"Then what are they?" Chen Shuang He asked.

How should I know? Ning Ning turned around and looked at Shi Zhong Tang.

Shi Zhong Tang laughed without saying a word. He reached out and touched Chen Shuang He's face, his fingers were warm. "We can feel you, touch you, we can also kill you, what do you think we are?"

Only humans could commit murder, not ghosts.

It was already very late when they got back to the hotel. For the sake of the next day's filming, Ning Ning very quickly bid Chen Shuang He farewell. Just as they were about to return to their rooms, Shi Zhong Tang stopped them.

He opened and closed his mouth for a long time, before he suddenly giggled and said, "Why not the two of you study the script in a hotel room tonight?"

Ning Ning, "..."

Chen Shuang He, "..."

Both of them had the same thing written in their eyes: Bro, are you kidding me?

"I was joking." Shi Zhong Tang put his arm around Chen Shuang He's shoulders. "Let's go, Little Boy Chen. After thinking about it, I decided not to give you such a good deal... Oh, that's right."

As he was walking, he turned his head and looked at Ning Ning. He restrained his cynicism and said in a serious manner, "Ning Ning, make sure you close the door when you get back. No matter what you hear tonight, don't open the door."

What did he mean? What would she hear at night?

In the middle of the night, Ning Ning woke up to the sound of someone singing.

She pricked her ears up and listened for a moment before pulling off her blanket and switching on the lights. "...Qu Yan? What are you doing in the middle of the night?"

Qu Yan was walking around at her doorway, his shadow crept in from underneath the door, it moved side to side along with his movements.

"Is she really my daughter?" He could not sleep at night, so he was reciting lines outside her door. This line belonged to a monologue. When he returned from the hospital, Juliet's father could not sleep. He held up a candlestick and paced up and down outside of his daughter's room, talking to himself in a quiet voice, "Of course she's my daughter. The looks are identical, the personalities are identical, their love for me are also identical..."

"What if she's not? What if she's just an imitation?"

The shadow stopped moving all of a sudden, the man outside was standing still.

He might have been the same as Juliet's father who had used the master key in his hands to open the door, using his bloodshot eyes from the lack of sleep to quietly stare at the fake daughter who was lying on the bed.

"Then she better continue to pretend to be her." The pale white candlelight illuminated her face, he laughed as he sang quietly, "Don't wear anything other than a red dress, don't have any hairstyle other than long hair, don't stop loving Papa, otherwise, otherwise..."

Ning Ning shuddered. The singing outside the door had stopped, the shadow in the door crack had vanished as well. Qu Yan had left, but he left with a warning, warning her: You best continue to pretend to be my daughter, if not...

The night lapsed. The next day, Ning Ning returned to the crew with panda eyes.

Because of her lack of sleep, she made an amount of mistakes while

filming. She was mercilessly verbally abused by Director Chen, they redid the shot several times. After she finally passed with great difficulty, Ning Ning rested on a chair, completely spent. Shi Zhong Tang came over from Chen Shuang He's side, touching her cheek.

"You look so frail." He said, "Do you need me to contribute my healthy body to provide nourishment for you?"

The corner of Ning Ning's mouth twitched. She supported her head with one hand and said quietly, "Thanks, but I am not a succubus."

"I was joking." Shi Zhong Tang asked her gently, "What happened last night?"

Just as Ning Ning was about to answer, her eyes suddenly looked straight in front of her.

Chen Shuang He was currently acting in a monologue scene. He did not manage to get Qu Yan to die in the conference room, payback finally befell upon him one after another. He wore a crumpled suit, his hair was in a mess. He held his phone up to his ear and shouted anxiously, "What did you say? The restaurant was closed down? Twelve customers had food poisoning... Damn, it must be that old bastard..."

Before he could finish, another call came in, he looked at the screen of the phone: Old Bastard.

While he was hesitating on whether to answer, two people rushed over from the side like the wind.

Ning Ning grabbed his left arm, Shi Zhong Tang grabbed his right arm, the two of them forcefully dragged him along at the same time as they ran.

With a loud crash, a magnificent and heavy chandelier came crashing down, smashing the spot Chen Shuang He was just standing on.

The crew was in disarray again, Director Chen shouted, "Calm down, everyone calm down..."

Sizzle, sizzle, sizzle, sizzle... Amidst the cries of the crowd, the remaining lights also sizzled twice before they went out at the same time.

"What the heck is going on?"

"Did the power go out?"

"Did some asshole turn off the main switch?"

It was pitch black, their phones lit up one by one, the sparse lights looked like fireflies floating above tombstones.

"From now on, neither of you are allowed to leave my side." Shi Zhong Tang said imposingly, "Go."

He led both Ning Ning and Chen Shuang He as they slowly and cautiously walked towards the exit.

There was something good about the dark—neither parties could see each other, neither parties could hurt each other.

But right at this moment, Chen Shuang He's phone rang.

He took it out and took a look, the caller ID was displayed: Qu Yan.

At the same time, behind the three of them, a dagger that was bright as snow slid out of its sheath.

Author's Note:

[Ah Xia's Debutante Tea Time.]

Little Angel: "Are they about to fight?"

Ah Xia: "Yes, they are about to fight."

Little Angel: "Can they win?"

Ah Xia, "Let me calculate—Demon Hunter Shi Zhong Tang lv89, Priest Ning Ning lv30, Mascot Three Minutes lv10...this group can get past the stage, but they would face some difficulty."

Little Angel, "Can I, a lv89 Holy Knight, provide support? If I alone am not enough...Lich Ning Yu Ren lv70 [because of her death, so she could only be a lich or a skeleton king], Necromancer Director Chen lv60 [his sole desire is to revive Ning Yu Ren], Main Tank—my father—Director Shi lv55 [300kg thick skin and flesh], Bard Pei Xuan lv88... Nevermind, delete that last one. That's right, may I ask what your job is...?"

Ah Xia, "Top Convenience Store Worker, Hot Bento skill lv999."

E/N:

Ah Xia is our Author-sama's nickname. We think "Three Minutes" refer to Chen Shuang He.

Author-sama is just assigning MMORPG's jobs/classes to her characters (along with the level).

Chapter 135

135: Vanishing Knife

Upon seeing the caller display, Chen Shuang He thought: Oh no.

The ringing of the phone had exposed his position, a knife silently stabbed in his direction.

"Ah!!!"

Amidst his cry, the lights were switched on.

"Are you alright?!" Ning Ning asked as she held onto Chen Shuang He's arm.

"I'm fine." Chen Shuang He's face turned pale, he looked across the room. "The one who isn't is him..."

Ning Ning looked in the direction he was looking at and saw a teenager covering his face. In an instant, blood flowed out the gaps of his fingers.

The teenager looked at the bloodstained blade of the knife on the floor, then slowly looked up at Chen Shuang He who was standing behind the knife. With surprise and anger, he said with hatred, "It was you?"

"It wasn't me..." Before Chen Shuang He could finish speaking, the other party rushed over with a yell—he looked like he wanted to bring Chen Shuang He down with him. Some of the people around them screamed while the others held them apart. Amidst the chaos, no one was paying attention to the knife on the floor, when they looked back at it, it was actually gone.

"He must have hidden it!" A few days later, the teenager appeared on television. His face was wrapped in bandages, he was surrounded by microphones as he said with righteous indignation, "Chen Shuang He is the cancer of show business! From the start, he snatched the role of the male lead using his connection, then seeing that I was acting better than him, he grew jealous and slashed my face with a knife! As for the weapon that wasn't found...heh heh, looked through his living quarters, it must be hidden there!"

Ning Ning raised the remote control and pressed it to switch the television off. She turned back and looked at Chen Shuang He. "Don't

listen to his nonsense!"

Chen Shuang He sat on the sofa and acknowledged it with a terrible look on his face.

"...Let me talk to Director Chen for you." Ning Ning sighed. "Deleting all his scenes that had yet to be filmed just because the other party's face had a minor injury, how he dealt with this was definitely a little ruthless, no wonder the other had such a big reaction."

"It's no use." Chen Shuang He let out a forced laughter. "Don't you know what kind of person my father is?"

What kind of person was Director Chen? Ning Ning went out and walked a loop around the place before she finally found him at the reception area of the hotel. Director Chen was suited up and brimming with energy, behind him was an entire law firm that was overflowing with murderous intent that passersby would only dare to glance at them from the side.

"Director Chen, where are you going?" Ning Ning stopped him.

"I'm going to call a press conference." Director Chen let out a cold laughter. "I want to throw a lawyer's letter at that son of a bitch's face! No one attacks my movie! No one! Heh heh, I know who is the instigator behind him, they want to use this boy to launch a smear campaign against the male lead of my movie, then incite the audience to boycott my movie. Not a chance!"

Director Chen pushed Ning Ning away and led the group of lawyers as they left—he was not going into battle for his son, it was for his movie that was still in the works instead.

"I would always be envious of Chen Shuang He's talent in the past. The person who would get cramps from accepting awards, I wished I could exchange lives with him." Ning Ning looked at Director Chen as he left, she muttered, "There's nothing to exchange, I have Mama."

Although Ning Ning had never received an award for acting, she had also never been overlooked by her mother. Every time she returned from filming, there would be a handmade cake from Ning Yu Ren waiting for her. It was only days like these that the two of them who lived on chicken breasts could let go of their inhibitions and indulge themselves. Ning Ning suddenly wanted to ask the kitchen, if there was cake in the hotel. If there was, she wanted to bring a slice to Chen Shuang He.

Although she was not his mother, Ning Ning wanted to console him.

...After all, at this moment, no one else beside her would console him, trust him.

"Hello, is anyone around?" Ning Ning walked into the entrance of the restaurant. This was a star rated hotel that had a Chinese and Western restaurant, but they didn't seem to operate twenty-four hours. Although the door was opened, the lights inside were all switched off. It might be that the business was not doing well and they were on power saving mode? Just as Ning Ning was making blind conjectures, a man wearing a chef's uniform walked out of the kitchen, asking with a smile, "You're from the crew of < < Juliet > >?"

Ning Ning was surprised before she nodded her head.

"You came at the right time." The chef returned into the kitchen then came out holding a box of cake that was tied with a ribbon. "I have just finished baking it, do you want to send it yourself or do you want me to send it for you?"

There was a note stuck on the box, the cake was actually for Chen Shuang He. Ning Ning was a little curious. Beside her, was there another person who wanted to console him? Thus she asked the chef, "I'll do it. Right, who ordered the cake?"

"Someone from your crew came over and ordered it." The chef said, "Her surname is Liu, I addressed her as Miss Liu, I have her contact number here."

Little Liu was a staff member of the crew, Ning Ning knew who she was as well, thus she did not think too much about it. Chen Shuang He was still a handsome man anyhow, it was to be expected that there would be girls going after him. Ning Ning brought the cake back to Chen Shuang He's room. "Dun dun dun, look what I brought you?"

"I don't like cake." Chen Shuang He sat on the sofa while hugging his knees. He looked up at her and hesitated for a moment before he said, "But since you've already brought it here, I will have a slice."

"Hold on, I'll cut the best slice for you." Ning Ning smiled as she opened the box, then she was shocked.

A cake was in the box, there were no strawberries nor any other fruits on the cake, there was a bloody shirt on it instead. The shirt was a little familiar, they had definitely seen someone wear it—in fact, it was just recently.

"Oh no!!" Footsteps rang out outside, followed by the sound of someone knocking on the door. Little Liu seemed to have brought a crowd to Chen Shuang He's door. She shouted anxiously, "Wang Xing

was also slashed across the face, are you guys alright? Quickly open the door!"

Ning Ning and Chen Shuang He exchanged looks, they saw a trace of panic in each other's eyes.

"Give it to me." Shi Zhong Tang, who was originally reading a comic book on the bed, got up all of a sudden. He walked to the table and tsk-ed twice with disgust, then quickly folded the bloodied shirt up and hid it. Luckily, it was summer, clothes were generally thin. He had just hidden the clothes in his arms when the door was opened, Little Liu brought a group of people and rushed in together. They went around the room before finally returning to the cake. They stared at the cake for a long while before someone suddenly pointed on the red-coloured blot on top of it and said, "Oh my, is that blood?"

"It's strawberry jam." Ning Ning cut out that side of the cake and pushed it up to her mouth. "You can taste it if you don't believe me."

Little Liu's expression turned ugly, how would she dare to try it? She switched the topic. "It's good that you two are fine. Poor Wang Xing, his face was slashed, moreover..."

Either by design or by accident, Little Liu glanced at Chen Shuang He who was behind Ning Ning and said, "The weapon disappeared again."

What do you mean *again*?

Her words signified something. Another person in the crew was hurt again, the place they got hurt was—again—the face, the weapon was a knife again, the knife went missing again, every lead finally pointed to one person—

"It could not be more obvious that someone is trying to implicate him by planting evidence." Within the room, Shi Zhong Tang laughed as he told Ning Ning, "That Miss Liu might not necessarily like Little Boy Chen. Maybe, she likes Qu Yan. She might have been dispatched by Qu Yan for this incident, otherwise, it would be impossible for her to rush in to look for evidence the moment you brought the cake in."

"I'm sorry." Ning Ning told Chen Shuang He as her face turned red.

"It's fine. Since they want to sabotage me on purpose, even if you did not bring it here, someone else would." On the contrary, Chen Shuang He did not blame her at all, he even consoled her.

But just as his voice faded out, they heard Shi Zhong Tang laugh. "That might not be true."

Both of them looked towards his direction. The cake on the table had yet to be taken away, it was still stained with blood, no one had dared to eat it either. Shi Zhong Tang dabbed his finger on the red liquid. He brought the liquid—one unknown to be either strawberry jam or blood—to his nose to take a whiff, then the corners of his mouth curled up, as if he had smelled a conspiracy.

"My guess is that no matter if the crew ordered a cake or fried rice, you would have been the one who sent it to Little Boy Chen in the end." Shi Zhong Tang smiled as he told Ning Ning, "As to why it has to be you...maybe Boss Qu wished to send Little Boy Chen to hell with your help."

Ning Ning had a grim expression, "I don't want to do something like that."

"Then you have to be more vigilant in the future." Shi Zhong Tang said, "The cake you helped bring here, anything you have said or anything you have done without you noticing—they can be used by someone else, used against Little Boy Chen...have a bite, it's strawberry jam."

As he was speaking, he reached out his finger with the red liquid to Chen Shuang He's mouth. Chen Shuang He pushed it away with a look of disgust, he frowned and said, "The person Boss Qu wants to kill is me, right? Why must he make things so troublesome?"

That day within the set when electricity went out, the lit up phone pointed out his position, he clearly only needed one stab to kill him, why did he have to make things so complicated?

"Although I want to say that this is because he is obeying the rules—strictly following the 'no killing the person who snuck in' rule set by the theater..." Shi Zhong Tang shook his head, "but this sounds too unbelievable, I don't even believe it when I said it out loud like that."

After a brief pause, he said, "Social erasure."

Everyone there was an adult, although Shi Zhong Tang had only said two words, both Ning Ning and Chen Shuang He understood what the words meant.

"The quickest would be tonight, the latest would be in three days, a rumour like this will surface in the crew—the weapon could not be found, because the weapon is still in the hands of the criminal." Shi Zhong Tang said, "Afterwards, one after another, there would be victims appearing repeatedly. Every one of them would get slashed in the face, every one of them would speak ill of Little Boy Chen, then

have a grudge with him."

"Nonsense." Chen Shuang He's face turned green. "Who would believe such an amusing rumour?"

"The more amusing a rumour is, the more people will believe it." Shi Zhong Tang let out a bland laugh. "No one cares what kind of person you are, they will describe you as whatever they want you to be."

At night, a rumour surfaced in the crew—the weapon could not be found, because the weapon was still in the hands of the criminal. The name of the criminal was Chen Shuang He, those that had offended him would not be let off.

Chapter 136

136: Spreading like a Virus

No matter how many rumours there were, no matter how many accidents there were within the crew, as long as Director Chen was alive, the shooting would continue.

"A!"

The door opened, a pair of red high heels stopped at the doorway.

The room was empty, the famous calligraphy and paintings on the walls, the European style furniture on the floor, even the bird cage hung by the window had been taken away by the creditors. All that was left were pieces and pieces of bills, piled on the floor like a white coloured tombstone.

Chen Shuang He laid on this tombstone, the red high heels walked to his side, he opened his eyes and looked at her, "...Are you here to make fun of me too?"

Ning Ning slowly squatted down. She touched his bloodied lip with her finger, he frowned with pain. She retracted her finger and looked at the blood on her fingertip. She slowly put it up to her mouth and gave it a lick.

Chen Shuang He swallowed, his voice was a little husky, "Does it taste good?"

Ning Ning did not answer him, she just bent down and kissed him.

He resisted her at first, but his breathing gradually got more and more rapid. He reached out and hugged her all of a sudden, the two of them rolling onto the floor with him on top of her.

He lowered his head and kissed her. He was a hungry and thirsty traveller lost in the desert and her lips was the oasis of said desert, the spring in the middle of the oasis. He bent down devoutly, feeling touched as he used her lips to quench his thirst.

They kissed passionately for a moment before Chen Shuang He suddenly pulled her off the ground and dragged her towards the door.

"Leave this place." He threw her out the door. Just as he was about to close the door, she blocked the door with both her hands. Unless he

could heartlessly crush her fingers, he could not chase her away.

"Let me stay." Ning Ning grabbed onto the door firmly and said, "Papa won't continue to oppose you if I stay here."

Chen Shuang He sighed, "That might be true if you were the real Juliet."

Ning Ning froze.

"Ah Xiu." Chen Shuang He gently called out—Ah Xiu, her real name. Not the lady of a big financial group, but the daughter of a vegetable farmer. "Although I brought you a lot of trouble, I taught you a lot of things as well. Do you remember the contract the two of us signed?"

"I remember." Ning Ning stammered, "I'll help you act as Juliet, you'll give me money and teach me how to read, up to the point of me being able to pass the department store female staff written examination..."

"The current you will definitely be able to pass the department store written examination, you can also definitely marry the man of your dreams—Ah Niu Ge..." Chen Shuang He spat. "I taught you so well, to the point where I want to marry you as well, don't tell me you still want to marry Ah Niu Ge now."

"I like you." Ning Ning said.

Chen Shuang He was startled. It took a long while before he smiled at her, "I like Juliet."

The flames of love dissipated from Ning Ning's eyes. She looked down dejectedly, but she unexpectedly heard the person in front of her say, "...I love you deeply."

Ning Ning looked up at him abruptly.

"Juliet is my first love from the past. I fell in love with her at first sight, even if she's dead now, I cannot forget about her. And you," Chen Shuang He said gently, "...are the person I love now."

The two of them looked at each other deeply.

"...So you have to leave." Chen Shuang He laughed. "I have already killed Juliet, I don't want to kill you. He already knows that you are but an imitation. The reason he did not oppose you as he did against me is that he doesn't know that we love each other, if he were to find out..."

He paused before he said in a low voice, "Then compared to me, he

would hate you even more."

"Cut!" Director Chen shouted, "Very good, this scene passes!"

Only his voice could be heard within the crew, there was no other voice. Be it the other actors, the cameramen or the make up artists, everyone gazed at Chen Shuang He with a peculiar expression. No matter where he went, their gazes and whispers followed.

This could not go on.

"Director Chen." Ning Ning looked for Director Chen in private. "Regarding the rumours that have been popping up recently..."

"I already know." Director Chen waved his hand. "This is a good opportunity for Chen Shuang He."

"Ah?" Ning Ning said wide-eyed. *What is this guy saying? Don't tell me he has gone senile already?*

"The actor I admire the most is Ning Yu Ren. She has a special point about her, she can get into character no matter what kind of role she had to play, transforming herself completely into that person, the emotions in the show were her actual emotions." Director Chen had a look of longing on his face. "Few actors can achieve such a thing, Shuang He had just gotten such an opportunity."

Ning Ning seemed to understand what he meant, but she found it kind of unbelievable, because normally no father would treat their child like that.

"What you meant to say is...Chen Shuang He's situation in the crew right now is very similar to the situation Romeo faces in the show, so you are allowing the others to continue to attack him, slander him, hurt him?" Ning Ning's voice got louder and louder, as if she was getting angry.

Director Chen shot her a strange look. "Why are you angry? You like him?"

Ning Ning was perplexed for a moment before saying in depressingly, "He's your son."

"There is no father and son on the set, in this place, he's an actor, I'm a director." Director Chen laughed.

Ning Ning fell silent for an instant. She asked, "Are movies really more important to you than your family?"

Director Chen seemed to have been amused by her childish words, he laughed out loud. "I can look for a new wife if she dies, I can birth

a new son if I lose him. One hundred years later, what would lie in the coffin with me is not my wife, neither would it be my son, but my movies! The movie characters that I have created! We will immortalise one another!!"

...Possibly.

In the history of movies a hundred years later, Director Chen and his movies could possibly be there, people would worship him and praise him, they would even overlook his flaws, but at this moment, Ning Ning was terrified by his madness and callousness.

She returned to the hotel with a heavy heart. She had thought that Chen Shuang He should be fine with Shi Zhong Tang accompanying him. In the end, she knocked on the door for a very long time before it finally opened, Shi Zhong Tang stood in the doorway and said, "You came at the right time..."

He looked back, Ning Ning looked at where he was looking as well, chills ran through her body.

Chen Shuang He was lying face down by the table, bent over, clawing his throat. He was coughing and hurling repeatedly, red liquid could vaguely be seen dripping from the corner of his mouth. This was not the set, they were not acting!

Ning Ning's first reaction was—Did Boss Qu finally still decide to strike?

"Hold on!" Ning Ning ran towards the door frantically. "I'll go get someone!"

In the end, Shi Zhong Tang dragged her back in before she could take a second step.

She took a look at Chen Shuang He and saw that he was still hurling. He was wearing an extremely painful expression, Ning Ning told Shi Zhong Tang frantically, "What else do you want to say to me? Quickly, I don't think he can hold on for much longer!"

Shi Zhong Tang did not say anything, all he did was look at her with a smile.

Ning Ning struggled, but she was unable to break her arm free from his hand. She looked at him with surprise and doubt. "Shi Zhong Tang..."

Just as she thought that Shi Zhong Tang was acting a little strange and scary, Chen Shuang He finally stopped hurling. He wiped his sweat and turned his head feebly. "I'm fine, it's just, too spicy."

"..." Ning Ning, "Huh?"

"This." Chen Shuang He held out an unfinished meal box. "The crew's meal for the day. I brought it back to have it here, the crazy chef poured chilli oil all over the food..."

"...But the meal we had was not like that." Ning Ning looked towards Shi Zhong Tang after she finished speaking.

Shi Zhong Tang raised his hands in the air in surrender, with a look of innocence he said, "I saw that the food was too bland, so I added a little something extra for flavour."

Chen Shuang He, "...What you meant by a little, is it a bottle or two bottles of chilli oil?"

Shi Zhong Tang, "Oh, three bottles."

Internal strife had surfaced while the enemy was still around, Chen Shuang He first fought with Shi Zhong Tang. Unfortunately, he did not win. He sat dejectedly on the sofa. Ning Ning reached out with a wet towel afterwards, nursing his red and swollen mouth as she said, "What do we do for the kiss scene tomorrow?"

Ning Ning was at a loss. If the swelling didn't go down the next day, then what they would be filming would not be <<After Juliet's Death>>, but <<A Bite of Chen Shuang He>>1—the audience would think she was eating a sausage if they weren't paying attention.

"Haha, sorry, sorry." Shi Zhong Tang came over and apologised. "I didn't think that you are so bad at eating spicy food... How about me acting in your stead tomorrow?"

Ning Ning and Chen Shuang He looked at him puzzled, their expressions seemed to be asking: *You? What do you mean act? A masked person who's equivalent to an invisible man like you, no one would be able to see you act.*

"If this goes on, you're done for." Shi Zhong Tang told Chen Shuang He, "Even if the shoot finished up for the movie and got popular later, it would have nothing to do with you—your reputation would have already been ruined. If everyone thought you were the culprit, that you had hidden the weapon, that you had bullied your colleagues using your father behind you...then you would be even if you were not."

Then he started laughing. "So the three of us have to act out a scene for them."

A few days later, a few videos appeared on the internet.

The contents of the videos were the same, the only difference were the names.

< <Shocking! Under the broad daylight, a member of the crew actually blatantly...> >

< <Shocking! Multiple incidents of causing injury in a crew, the real culprit is actually...> >

< <Shocking! My hair stood on its ends instantly, 1:30 left me stunned!> >

At this point of time the shocking tag had yet to exist, titles like this had not yet been oversaturated, a university student, Lu Ren2, got his attention caught just like that. He clicked on it to check it out. The video quality was very bad, the camera was shaky, one look and he knew that this was filmed secretly.

He got a little excited when Ning Ning and Chen Shuang He's face appeared. He put down his hand that was rubbing his feet and clicked on the fullscreen button. "Damn, who was the hero who sneaked into the filming location to take this?"

The content of the video was a little boring. Ning Ning and Chen Shuang He were acting for a little while before they were shouted at by Director Chen, afterwards, it was all just the two of them being reprimanded.

But even so, Lu Ren did not fast forward, staring at the screen very patiently. Although the contents were boring, due to the title of the video, as it got closer to a minute and thirty seconds playtime, the more nervous he felt. As it was rapidly approaching a minute thirty seconds, he actually leaned back so that he was some distance away from the screen as if he was watching a ghost movie.

"Ah!"

A scream rang out and the screen suddenly turned black.

"What the hell?" Lu Ren smashed his mouse, he felt deceived. Right as he was about to close the video, the screen lit up again, as if what had happened before was just a power outage.

"What the hell is going on? The power has been going out once every few days."

"The power is back, the power is back, continue filming."

"Everyone in positions."

"Hold on, where is my shoe, who stepped on my shoe?"

After a moment of chaos, the crew restarted filming. At the same time, a crew member seemed to have found the person shooting the video. He walked quickly towards the camera. The screen turned black again the moment he reached out with his hand.

"That's it?" Lu Ren stared at the screen blankly. "It ended just like that?"

This time he did not hesitate. He immediately fast forwarded to a minute and twenty five seconds. A few seconds later, a scream, the screen turning black again. The moment the lights lit up was exactly at one minute thirty seconds playtime. This time, Lu Ren stuck his face up to the screen and stared at it.

Chills ran down his back.

This time he saw it clearly.

He would rather not have seen it clearly. It was already in the middle of the night, how would he wake up to go to the toilet later?

"Hi!" A hand suddenly patted his shoulder.

"Ah!" Lu Ren immediately jumped out from the chair.

He got a fright, the person behind also got frightened. He held his chest and said, "What are you doing? You scared the hell out of me, are you watching a ghost movie?"

Once he finished speaking, he turned around and looked at Lu Ren's computer. "Huh, that's not a ghost movie."

"Ghost movies can't be compared to this, those are all fake. Come, come, come, let me show you something exhilarating!" Lu Ren completely did not mind that his roommate had frightened him so much his life was shortened by two years. He excitedly hopped back on the computer and reopened the video to show it to his roommate. While they were watching, he was even persistently pointing at the screen. "Pay attention to this spot, pay attention to this spot."

His roommate felt impatient, what was so interesting about one lousy video?

One minute thirty seconds later.

"Ah!" His roommate screamed as well.

He was more timid compared to Lu Ren, but his eyesight was better than Lu Ren. He saw it clearly the first time. When the lights were switched on, a dagger was floating behind Chen Shuang He. At the beginning, he thought that it was hanging by a wire of sorts, but the

dagger suddenly lowered itself, retreated two steps back and vanished.

With that, it looked like an invisible hand was holding a dagger and sneakily getting closer to Chen Shuang He. When the lights were suddenly switched back on, it then silently kept the knife back, sheathing it into an invisible sheathe.

From when it appeared to when it retreated and disappeared, it took a total of three seconds.

Most of the crew was standing across Chen Shuang He, only the person filming the video was standing behind him, so Lu Ren did not know whether the crew saw this incident, but the person filming the video had definitely seen it, otherwise, the shot would not have suddenly shook that much.

"How is it?" Lu Ren turned around and looked at his roommate.

"I..." His roommate struggled to speak for a long time before he said meekly, "I'm a little scared, can you accompany me to the toilet at night?"

Lu Ren felt a lot more relieved in that moment. *So I was not the only one that was scared.*

"But who was it that was so inconsiderate to send such a terrifying video in the middle of the night? I must definitely forward it to someone else." An even more inconsiderate smile appeared on his roommate's face. "If I don't dare to go to the toilet, everyone else doesn't have to think about going to the toilet."

That night, the three videos revealing the truth behind the case within the crew of <<After Juliet's Death>> started spreading on the internet like a virus.

A/N:

After Ah Xia's afternoon tea...

Little Angel picked up an item, "Hmm what is this, it's actually Ah Xia's manuscript for tomorrow..."

[Ten minutes later]

Little Angel closed the book in his hands with a complicated expression, he murmured, "I'll have to buy something nice for Ah Xia to eat later, she will have to eat blades tomorrow..."

1This is a wordplay for an actual Chinese documentary <<A Bite of China>>. .

2This is a pun for passerby/pedestrian.

Chapter 137

137: Adapted from a True Story

Morning, outside the set.

"Sir!" A monk suddenly jumped in front of Director Chen. "This monk was observing the celestial phenomena at night and saw that your crew has an overwhelming bloody omen, it must be an evil spirit causing trouble! You only need to pay eight hundred for a blessing..."

"Go, go, go play at the side." A taoist priest pushed him out of the way, "Observing celestial phenomenons is a Taoist's specialty, what has it got to do with a monk like you? Sir, this old priest can see that your ophryon1 has darkened, I can vaguely see that a bloody omen is upon you..."

Director Chen felt absurd. Once he entered the set, he dragged Li Shan Zhu along and complained, "Where did this group of preachers and spirit catchers come from? I am clearly filming <<Juliet>>, with them around, it's like I'm filming <<Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio>>2...Hmm? What are you looking at?"

Li Shan Zhu was extremely bored, he had been watching a video on the laptop in his hands. The title of the video was: <<Shocking! My hair stood on it's ends instantly, 1:30 left me stunned!>>. Director Chen watched the video along with him to the end, then they looked at each other.

"Shan Zhu." Director Chen coughed once, "Get one person to come and bless this place."

Li Shan Zhu was taken aback, "Director Chen, you really believe this?"

"Believe it my ass!" Director Chen sneered, "But it doesn't matter whether I believe it or not, what's important is that others believe it, the audience believes it."

"What you mean is..." Li Shan Zhu seemed to have understood it.

"<<The Blair Witch Project>>." Director Chen spat out a phrase, "A mockumentary horror movie."

<<The Blair Witch Project>>, a film with less than sixty thousand dollars investment, done with a group of newcomers,

running less than eighty two minutes—it ended up as a horror movie miracle that had a box office of two hundred and fifty million dollars. If you talked about the picture quality, there was not much picture quality from a film that was filmed completely on a digital camera. If you talked about the content, the plot was simple and there was nothing extraordinary about it. If you talked about the marketing...it was practically miraculous! Every person who came later then continuously imitated, researched, and attempted to surpass them.

First, posts appeared on the internet one by one, then videos, then images, they told everyone one thing—Maryland housed a witch who killed people, (a witch named) Blair.

No one believed it at first, there were also not many discussions about it. But not long after, missing people notices started appearing in newspapers and magazines, the notices stated that three university students went to Maryland to search for Blair, only to end up missing in the end.

People did not believe the posts on the internet, but they would believe the newspaper. Very quickly, Blair became a central topic among many people, especially young students. When the discussion reached a certain level, a piece of news appeared. It said that a belonging of the three university students was found, it was a digital camera, it had filmed what happened when they went looking for Blair. Currently, a film company acquired the rights from the family of the deceased, edited the footage and screened it.

Many people believed it to be real, but it was actually fake. Everything was fake. The three so-called university students were just the director's classmates.

"No matter if the video is real or not, we can treat it as something real." Director Chen laughed. "We can imitate <<The Blair Witch Project>>, we can tell people that...our <<After Juliet's Death>> is adapted from a true story."

Thus, <<After Juliet's Death>> that was supposed to be a pure romance film—after many twists and turns, due to an assortment of reasons, in the end turned into...

"<<After Juliet's Death>>, a thrilling romance film based on a true story. The story begins in 1970. An old man was sentenced to death for murder. In court, he told everyone that the reason he killed the 'gigolo' was because said 'gigolo' had eloped with his daughter. As they were eloping, his daughter died in a car accident. Afraid of payback, the 'gigolo' found a woman who sounded identical to his

daughter, just so she could call him at certain time intervals, pretending that his daughter was not dead..."

On the sofa, Ning Ning put down the newspaper in her hands and asked the two people in front of her, "What exactly does Director Chen want to do?"

Chen Shuang He continued to peel the apple without looking up. "Get publicity, get headlines."

"Haha, this is to your advantage, there are no downsides." Shi Zhong Tang rubbed Chen Shuang He's head, the latter pushed his hand away angrily. "Next time someone gets hurt in the crew, you will only gain popularity from it, it will not bring you negative impacts anymore."

Just like Shi Zhong Tang said.

A few more people got hurt in the crew afterwards, the reactions of the outside world was...excitement!

Another accident had happened, how exciting! Another video had been uploaded on the internet, how exciting!

A number of people started to use the same passion they had while binge watching a drama series to follow the "supernatural videos" associated with the Juliet crew online. People who could not wait would even loiter near the set, with a look of expectation they looked at every actor and every staff member from the crew, wishing that an accident would befall them immediately.

At the same time, a few newspapers and magazines also started to publish news related to this. One had even interviewed one of the persons involved in this—a woman had claimed to be the person the female lead in the movie was based on, the one whom the 'gigolo' had found to imitate the daughter of the old man.

Even the third male actor who had left the crew because of his facial injury popped out and helped it gain traction. He claimed during the interview, "Now that I think about it carefully, the reason I got hurt was because I was standing too close to Chen Shuang He at the time. Moreover, my height and physique is similar to his...so when the power went out, the culprit had gotten the wrong person."

Gradually, no one believed Chen Shuang He to be the culprit anymore.

On the contrary, they believed something else instead.

"Now, the audience has very high expectations for this film.

Furthermore, according to the feedback I've just received..." Director Chen glanced at Chen Shuang He. "Around seventy percent of the audience thinks that you might die in the process of filming this movie."

Chen Shuang He's expression was incomparably stinky, was there a father who damned his son like this?

"For the sake of satisfying the audience's needs." Director Chen laughed. "I've decided to stage a play on the day this movie officially premieres."

The onlookers looked at each other, Ning Ning looked at him. "A play? Will there be enough time?"

"I didn't say that I need all of you to act out a complete play. Gimmick, the main thing is the gimmick." Director Chen had people distribute the scripts.

Ning Ning received the script and took a look, it was really a gimmick.

This play was the equivalent of adding a prologue to the movie. On the court, an old man—who was accused of being a murderer—was escorted by two policemen to the defendant stand.

A pale man stood across from him on the plaintiff stand. He was but a spirit and not a person, accusing the old man with tears streaming down his cheeks, "You murderer!"

"You're right, I'm a murderer." The old man looked at him with resentment. "To take revenge for my dead daughter!"

The two of them blamed each other, resented each other, in the end, they rushed out of their stands and ran up to one another.

Their rage and hatred pulled open the red curtains that covered the screen, the movie then officially began.

"Naturally, we can't do this in every theater, I will arrange for you to act out this play in a designated theater. Of course, if the response is good, we might add more sessions in the future." Director Chen smiled at Chen Shuang He and Qu Yan.

This play was practically a two-man scene for the two of them. The others—even the female lead Ning Ning—were but spirits walking around on stage.

"The play would mainly be acted out by Chen Shuang He and Qu Yan." Director Chen looked towards Ning Ning. "As for you, I have

other arrangements."

Director Chen very quickly found a theater, he even had people decorate it beforehand. By the time Ning Ning went over and took a look, she felt chills on her back.

"How is it?" Director Chen asked her with slight smugness. "Doesn't it have an antique Republic era grand theater flavour?"

"It does." Ning Ning forced a smile.

She had never seen what a grand theater looked like in the Republic era, she was only looking at the red curtains that were draped on either sides of the screens, the carved wooden chairs in front of the screen—besides the fact that there were no masked people, everything else was exactly the same as Life Theater.

There was an instant when Ning Ning thought that she had accidentally stepped into Life Theater of this time period.

With this level of similarity, it was definitely not a coincidence. Ning Ning stared at Director Chen and asked, "Director Chen, why did you think to renovate the theater this way?"

"Oh, I was not the one who thought of it." Director Chen casually answered, "Here, here, and here, they belong to the old man, daughter and 'gigolo' respectively."

Ning Ning was stunned. She looked to where he was pointing, those three seats that were placed side by side. The other chairs were of natural wood colour, only these three chairs were painted white. With colours that stood out so much, they looked like three candles burning brightly in a mourning hall.

"You don't have much of a role in the play. When the play ends, don't change out of your clothes and don't remove your makeup, come down immediately and sit here." Director Chen pointed at the seat belonging to the daughter, he smiled at Ning Ning. "Here, try it out."

Ning Ning could only sit down.

"How does it feel?" Director Chen asked.

"Nothing much." Ning Ning shook her head. "I feel like a ghost."

"I want you to be like a ghost." Director Chen laughed. "I want the audience beside you to feel that the old man, the daughter and the 'gigolo' are ghosts who have appeared, sitting by their sides, watching the movie along with them."

Ning Ning smiled at him awkwardly, asking the previous question

again, "Who gave you this idea? Who decorated the theater?"

"The idea is mine." Director Chen said, "The theater...was designed by someone I know well."

Just as Ning Ning was about to ask the name of the person he knew, Director Chen suddenly answered a call and went out. When he went out, Shi Zhong Tang walked in. He looked at his surroundings and exclaimed.

"Who did this?" Shi Zhong Tang laughed. "Did Qu Yan give Director Chen the idea?"

"Qu Yan has been to Life Theater?" Ning Ning asked.

"I don't know about that, I don't care about any customers except you." Shi Zhong Tang shrugged. "Maybe Boss Qu told Director Chen through him?"

Ning Ning took a look at him then turned her face away, saying in a low voice, "That's impossible..."

The title of the play was < Trial > .

The word trial would agitate Boss Qu greatly, it would remind him of the trial he and his daughter faced, the day they were killed. Standing on such a stage, he would go into an even bigger frenzy compared to the past, he would lose his head more, he would also hate the one on the plaintiff stand more.

At this time Director Chen returned from the outside, Chen Shuang He, Qu Yan and others were following behind him.

Chen Shuang He took a look at his surroundings and got a shock as well, he walked to Ning Ning's side and asked in a low voice, "...What is going on here?"

Ning Ning did not answer him, she looked behind him instead.

Chen Shuang He waited for a moment before he too turned his head back slowly, looking behind him.

Qu Yan was standing a short distance away, behind him was a black figure. The figure was looking around his surroundings in a trance-like state, then his eyes coldly shifted towards them.

Those eyes made Ning Ning feel that...

Seventy percent of the audience was not wrong, Chen Shuang He might really die in this movie.

1An ophryon is the point on the midline of the forehead just above

the glabella.

2Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio, is a collection of Classical Chinese stories by Pu Songling, comprising close to five hundred "marvel tales" in the *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* styles, which serve to implicitly criticise societal problems then.

Chapter 138

138: Life Opera House

Although he called it a gimmick, Director Chen planned to perfect it.

He found specialists to design the costumes, he gave emergency summons to Li Shan Zhu who was having a holiday—he was now locked up, using his blood, sweat, and tears to write a script. Once the script was issued, they were given to a few actors to rehearse in thirty days.

Ning Ning did not have much of a role, after the arrangements were done, Director Chen had not taken a few steps out of the door before Ning Ning caught up to him from behind. "Director Chen, you have not told me who decorated the theater. I won't hide it from you, I've been renovating my house recently, I really like this style..."

Getting hounded by her, Director Chen had no choice, he could only give her an address.

It was really someone he knew well. Not only did Director Chen know the person well, Ning Ning too knew the person well.

She pressed the doorbell, a middle-aged woman wearing a black cheongsam answered the door. Her voice was vigorous and full of a man's charm. "You are?"

"Cro..." The words Cross-dresser Li almost escaped her mouth. "Teacher Li hello, I am a friend of Director Chen, Zhao Yu Fen."

"Oh, it's you." The world famous cross-dressing makeup artist let her in. He held his tea set with orchid fingers. "Old Chen has already greeted me...do you like red tea or green tea?"

"Green tea, thank you."

Green-coloured longjing tea was served, Teacher Li sat down in front of Ning Ning. "I am not a professional designer, if you want to renovate your house, I might not be much help..."

"Teacher Li." Ning Ning asked directly, "Have you been to Life Theater?"

After she finished speaking, she stared at his face intently.

If he had never been to Life Theater, he would have a puzzled expression upon hearing the name, but if he had...

The amiable business smile disappeared from Teacher Li's face, he had his eyes fixed on Ning Ning.

"You've been there." Ning Ning said with surety.

"No, my lover has been there." Teacher Li got up and returned to his bedroom. When he came back, he was holding a folder full of information.

The folder was opened on the table. On the first page was a drawing. In the pitch black night, at the entrance of a very old-styled movie theater, there hung two long strings of white lanterns, the lanterns illuminated the words on the plaque: 'Life Theater'.

"Since you mentioned that name, I guessed that you're the same as my lover, you've entered that place." Teacher Li suddenly thought of something and laughed in spite of himself. "No wonder Old Chen said that your acting skills have improved in leaps and bounds."

Ning Ning flipped through the folder in front of her. Initially, she flipped it page by page. Her hand froze all of a sudden, she quickly flipped it back a few pages, to a specific page in the folder.

There were no words written on that page, there were a few photos pasted instead, two of which had words on them. One of them had a drawing, an ancient painting. The picture was similar to 'Along the River During the Qingming Festival'² painting. There was heavy traffic on the streets, pedestrians followed one another, the streets were littered with many shops, black tiles and white walls, plaques hanging above doors, the place looked bustling at a glance. Only after flipping through a few pages and coming back to it did she realise that there was a teahouse amidst the shops.

A sign hung above the entrance to the teahouse, written on it was...

"Life Opera House." Ning Ning quietly read out, she looked up at Teacher Li. "This is?"

"This is an imitation painting of <<Along the River During the Qingming Festival>>." Teacher Li said, "Although it's fake, the artist was a person from the Ming Dynasty³ era, so it could still be considered an antique. Originally, I wanted to buy it, but the owner of this painting liked it a lot, they were unwilling to sell it, I was only allowed to take two photos."

Ning Ning took another look at the photo, it looked...too alike.

Although the sign was different, the two strings of lanterns hanging by the door—especially with the masked person standing by the entrance—it looked like an ancient version of Life Theater no matter how she looked at it.

She looked at the two other photos. One of them was a photo of a novel cover that had turned yellow, the title seemed to be made out of a few words, but the first few were unclear, only the last two words were legible—Strange Tales.

The other photo was a paragraph from the novel itself, traditional Chinese⁴ was hard to read (for her), Ning Ning identified them with difficulty: "Long Sheng from Jiangxi⁵ was touring Kaifeng⁶ with a friend at night. They accidentally entered a teahouse, and those who were seated were all masked people. Upon seeing them, the masked people went into raptures, chasing them relentlessly while shouting 'stowaway'..."

Upon reading that, Ning Ning's mouth dried up. She asked Teacher Li, "Is what's written on this...all true?"

"I don't know." Teacher Li shook his head. "A strange tales novel like this—that was written by an ancient person—usually has a mixture of truth and falsehoods. I could only say that if what was written was true, then Life Theater would have existed from at least the Ming Dynasty period. The name then was not 'Theater', it was called Life Opera House."

Ning Ning stood there dumbfounded for a moment. She had once looked everywhere for information on Life Theater too, but she did not come up with much. How could she have known that this thing existed in the Ming Dynasty? It was even under a different name.

"What else do you know?" She asked frantically.

"I don't know much." Teacher Li patted the folder on the table. "Just collecting these took almost half of my lifetime."

Ning Ning was taken aback. "Why?"

"...No why, I just want to be prepared." Teacher Li said blandly, "In case one day my lover got trapped inside and couldn't come out, I would at least know where to look for her."

Just as Ning Ning was about to ask whom his lover was, a cold snort rang out behind her. "Dad, you are looking at this crap again."

Ning Ning turned back, it was another familiar face.

Li Bo Yue, her manager. He was but a young man as of now. Taking

his age into account, he should have just entered show business. As a newbie, he should have needed to fight and toil for a very long period of time, but he had good luck, for some reason he got in the good graces of Movie Empress Ning Yu Ren, she immediately brought him to her side as her manager.

"Haven't you had enough?" He said to Teacher Li with an impatient look, "That woman obviously made it up to con you. It's one thing to believe in it for a year or two, why do you still believe it?"

"She wouldn't lie to me." Teacher Li glared at him.

Li Bo Yue rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

He walked towards his room, closing the door with a bang. Teacher Li who was behind him sighed, he told Ning Ning in an embarrassed manner, "My son is a little obstinate."

"...That's right, I'll be working for my friend tomorrow." Li Bo Yue's voice rang out behind the door, "I don't want to work for that woman anymore, seeing her makes me upset."

That was strange. Li Bo Yue was a smooth and slick fellow, he was on good terms with everyone, he could deal with stars of any weird personality. Who was it that made him feel unbearable? ...Wait a minute.

"I heard that your son is currently working for Ning Yu Ren." Ning Ning probed Teacher Li, "What's the matter? Is Ning Yu Ren not treating him well?"

"How could that be?" Teacher Li laughed. "Even if it was just for my sake, she would not make things difficult for him."

Ning Ning felt that it was strange. Teacher Li looked like he knew Mama very well, but she had never heard Mama mention anything to do with him. Moreover, from what Li Bo Yue had said...these two...

Ning Ning could not sit still in that moment. "Umm...your lover...could it be..."

"Little girl," Teacher Li smiled, placing a finger on his lips, "you're stepping on some lines here."

Seeing that he didn't want to delve deeply on it, Ning Ning did not pursue the matter, because she was afraid of the answer herself... Seeing him dressed in a long *cheongsam*, if the "lover" he was talking about was really referring to Ning Yu Ren, then Ning Ning wouldn't feel like she had a father, she would feel like she had another mother!

"Alright, it's getting late, I should get to work at the set." Teacher Li pushed the folder towards Ning Ning. "Take this."

Ning Ning was astonished. "Can I?"

"It's fine, I have more." Teacher Li smiled. "I'll give this one to you, treat it as a gift."

Seeing that Ning Ning accepted it with delight, he added on another sentence, "Propriety suggests reciprocity, you should give me something too."

"...What do you want?" Ning Ning asked.

"Answer me first." Teacher Li stared at her. "Have you been to Life Theater?"

An extreme amount of thoughts flashed in Ning Ning's mind, she shook her head. "I've never been... Someone I'm close to has been, when they came back, their health has been getting worse."

She was talking about Ning Yu Ren. If nothing went wrong, in these few years, Ning Yu Ren's health would start to deteriorate. Now that she thought about it, a scenario like this could only be created by the theater...

"So that's what it was." Teacher Li believed her, because the person he wanted to rescue was also Ning Yu Ren. Ning Yu Ren's situation at that time was just like what Ning Ning had described. This answer made him feel relieved and disappointed, he sighed. "I wanted to say, if you've been there, could you give me the address?"

A delighted Ning Ning: I cannot tell you even if I know the address.

If it could be divulged, Mama would have told him long ago, she wouldn't need to be the one to do it.

"Actually, my lover has already told me the address, but there was nothing there. No theater, no masked people. When I brought others over, they could not see anything either." Teacher Li said dejectedly, "Either only she could see it, or she was lying to me..."

You could not see it because you were not on the verge of despair...

"Old man, haven't you had enough?" Li Bo Yue's voice rang out again, sounding even more impatient. "Not only you, I have been to that place five hundred times already. There's nothing, only a stall selling popsicles. I told you that she's deceiving you, you wouldn't believe me..."

Amidst Li Bo Yue's rattle, Ning Ning left the house with Teacher Li.

Ning Ning said with the folder in her arms. "I'll take a good look and see if I can find any leads when I get back."

"Go ahead. Remember to inform me if you find any lead." Teacher Li exchanged phone numbers with her.

He watched Ning Ning leave, looking down and making a call.

It rang a few times before it connected.

"Hello, Old Pei." Teacher Li put the phone up to his ear. "Give me another copy of the information. The copy I have? I gave it away. A little one came, she's like us, a family member is trapped in there, she's looking up on the matters of the theater..."

In the taxi, Ning Ning could not wait as she flipped through the folder in her hands.

Ancient novel about strange tales, a tabloid from the republic era, an ancient legend passed down in the country...

Life Theater, Life Movie Theater, mask, masked people...

"Turns out there are so many people like me. Having gone in, not being able to leave." Ning Ning thought, "There are also a lot of people like Teacher Li, thinking of ways to get people out of it. When they failed, they recorded the incident down so that others in the future could look at it and think of ways to rescue people."

Ning Ning felt immensely miserable. Her vision was fixed on one of the pages, it was another strange tale. It was a story that happened in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty 7 years. A villager named Zhao Da was rushing for time at night, he walked past Life Opera House. The doorman at the entrance of the opera house was an alcoholic. Upon seeing that Zhao Da was carrying a bag of wine, he held him up and wouldn't let him go.

Zhao Da raged. "There is no free wine in the world, what are you going to give me in exchange?"

Doorman, "I have nothing to exchange with, how about I let you in to watch a play?"

Zhao Da looked at the pitch black opera house, he laughed coldly. "It's already late in the night, all the actors have gone home to sleep, what play would I be watching?"

The doorman laughed mischievously. "You can watch a play at any time, you'll see after you come in."

Zhao Da was intoxicated from drinking, he also thought about the

fact that there was only half a tael⁸ of inferior wine left in the bag, it was not a waste to give it to the other. Thus, he undid the wine bag and tossed it at him. "Alright, let this master go in and have a look."

He walked into the opera house with swagger, halfway through, he looked back, turning sober in an instant.

He saw that the doorman opened the wine bag but did not drink from it. He put it under his nose instead, sniffing it repeatedly. It made the doorman look like someone who could not eat food from the mortal realm, he could only sniff the aroma of the wine, sniff the aroma of offerings, sniff the smoke of the joss sticks people lit, the strange scene made Zhao Da's legs lose a bit of strength.

At this time, the interior of the opera house lit up.

Lights illuminated masks upon masks, groups of masked people sang and played instruments. Within the gradually opening curtains, a woman's singing voice rang out, "Under the Mawei Slope he searched in the mud, but failed to find any trace where she shed her blood...."⁹

Zhao Da, he transmigrated as Yang *Guifei*.¹⁰

He died soon after and returned. Furthermore, he started to like wearing women's clothes, soaking in hot springs and eating lychee, he very quickly could not stand the poverty of his family. He brought a jar of wine and went looking for the doorman.

This happened on a number of occasions. The doorman let Zhao Da enter the opera house without a ticket numerous times.

Finally, one day when Zhao Da entered, what welcomed him in the opera house were not the familiar masked people, the pleasant sounds of flutes and pipes.¹¹

It was but a cold voice from behind the curtains, "You snuck in."

Upon finishing the story, Ning Ning closed the folder and went into a daze. She closed her eyes and sighed. "So that's what happened on the matter of sneaking in."

Zhao Da who was happy to be Yang *Guifei*, along with a certain doorman, worked together to enact a story that could be described as a comedy and a tragedy, explaining the origins of the punishment of 'sneaking in' to Ning Ning, along with...

¹Longjing tea sometimes called by its literal translated name Dragon Well tea, is a variety of pan-roasted green tea from the area of Longjing Village in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China. It is produced mostly by hand and renowned for its high quality, earning it

the China Famous Tea title.

2Along the River During the Qingming Festival, also known by its Chinese name as the Qingming Shanghe Tu is a painting by the Song dynasty painter Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145).

3The Ming dynasty officially the Great Ming, was the ruling dynasty of China from 1368 to 1644 following the collapse of the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty.

4Traditional Chinese characters are Chinese characters, of any character set, that were created before 1946, later creations being designated simplified Chinese characters.

5Jiangxi is a landlocked province in the east of the People's Republic of China. Its capital and largest city is Nanchang.

6Kaifeng is a prefecture-level city in east-central Henan province, China. It is one of the Eight Ancient Capitals of China, having been the capital seven times in history, and is best known for being the Chinese capital in the Northern Song dynasty.

7The Qing dynasty, officially the Great Qing, was the last imperial dynasty of China. It was established in 1636, and ruled Inner China from 1644 to 1912. It was preceded by the Ming dynasty and succeeded by the Republic of China. The multiethnic Qing empire lasted for almost three centuries and formed the territorial base for modern China. It was the fourth largest empire in world history in terms of territorial size.

8Tael here refers to the Chinese tael, since 1959 standardized to 50 gram and a part of the Chinese system of weights and currency.

9Chang Hen Ge ("Song of Everlasting Regret") is a literary masterpiece from the Tang dynasty by the famous Chinese poet Bai Juyi (772-846). It retells the love story between Emperor Xuanzong of Tang and his favorite concubine Yang Guifei (719-756).

10Yang Yuhuan (719 — 15 July 756), often known as Yang Guifei (with Guifei being the highest rank for imperial consorts during her time), and known briefly by the Taoist nun name Taizhen was the beloved consort of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang during his later years. She is known as one of the Four Beauties of ancient China.

11The pipa is a four-stringed Chinese musical instrument, belonging to the plucked category of instruments. Sometimes called the "Chinese lute", the instrument has a pear-shaped wooden body with a varying number of frets ranging from 12 to 31.

Chapter 139

139: Master

Ning Ning returned to the theater.

Although Director Chen had booked the place to be used as a publicity venue, it would only be utilised on the premiere day, so it was still servicing patrons as per usual.

Director Chen had already left once he had taken a look at the venue. The theater began to screen a youth art film after he left.

The film was probably terrible, so when Ning Ning entered, there were only a few people scattered across the audience seats. The number of audience was already pitiable, when Ning Ning entered, one of them got up and left, brushing shoulders with Ning Ning. Ning Ning gave way to him, then took out her phone and sent a message, "I'm here."

An arm was raised from the audience seats, waving twice.

Ning Ning walked over and sat next to the person.

Qu Yan flashed a friendly smile at her. Just as he was about to say something, Boss Qu who was beside him said blandly, "Alright, you can go back now."

"Ok." Qu Yan was very obedient, he immediately got up from his seat. "I'll be on my way then, you two have a nice chat."

After he left, there was an empty seat between Ning Ning and Boss Qu, but both of them remained seated in their current seats and did not move. Neither of them was willing to get up, neither of them was willing to change seats.

"The first ever punishment for sneaking in was not only to punish the person who snuck in." Ning Ning stared at the screen and said, "It was also to punish the doorman at the same time."

The doorman had accepted Zhao Da's bribes, he had allowed Zhao Da to watch ten to twenty plays without a ticket, the characters involved in the plays numbered up to a hundred people. Moreover, Zhao Da did not have to pay any kind of price.

That seemed to have enraged Life Opera House. Thus, in the first

ever 'sneaking in' offense, Zhao Da was the 'stowaway' while the doorman was forced to be the 'executioner'. The two of them who once had a relationship as close as brothers turned on each other in this play. They fought each other with their lives as they tried to kill one another right then and there.

"The doorman usually receives protection from Life Theater. Besides the theater itself, no one could hurt nor kill him, only inside the movie <<Sneaking In>>..." Ning Ning turned her head and looked at Boss Qu, "the doorman would not be protected, he could be killed by anyone."

Zhao Da had successfully killed the alcoholic doorman. After all, the doorman was also a human once. Without the protection of the theater, what would differentiate them would be the malice and cunning of a human. The alcoholic doorman had unfortunately lost, but Zhao Da had not fared that much better. The new doorman didn't touch a drop of alcohol, the old tricks could not work anymore, Zhao Da could no longer enter the opera house, until one day, when he went to his neighbour's house to steal wine, he conveniently took the Life Ticket on the table...

"That's it?" Boss Qu said blandly.

Ning Ning was taken aback.

"You specifically looked for me just to tell me that?" Boss Qu sat in the audience seat, he looked at the screen and sneered. "I have known of these long ago. You saw it yourself, there were old people dressed in ancient clothes in the theater."

Those who dressed like ancient ladies, down and out scholars and ninth-rank officials were mostly not playing a role, they were just being themselves. The era which their clothes came from was the era where they came from, it brought the story of when they were from.

Ning Ning fell silent for a moment before saying, "You're doing this even when you know about it. You hate someone, they would hate you as well, you want to kill them, they would like to kill you as well."

"Then you should go." Boss Qu turned around and smiled at her. "I'm guessing that they don't know about this yet, go tell them."

Ning Ning felt stuck at once.

"...Why is it that no matter how I try to persuade you, you wouldn't listen?" She could not help but wipe the tears from her face. "Is it because I'm not the real Ning'er?"

She looked at him and asked sadly, "Do you not treat me as a daughter anymore? Not the first daughter nor the second daughter?"

Death could not shake Boss Qu, the thought of conciliation made him fall silent for a long while. He still shook his head in the end.

"There's nothing good to be had from being my daughter anyway. I cannot give you delicious food, delicious drinks, fun things, nice clothes and a husband who obeys you anymore. You might as well stop addressing me Papa." Boss Qu let out a helpless laugh. "And stop trying to persuade me. After all...you are not the real Ning'er."

These words made Ning Ning's heart turn cold.

She looked at the seat between them. She suddenly realised that they were no longer intimate enough to have nothing come between them. What was between them was not a seat, but a person.

At this time, the male lead on the screen had unfortunately gotten shot, he held on to his last breath and didn't die because of his feelings for the female lead. He traversed half of China and took a look at the female lead before he exclaimed and his wound started spurting blood, this magical plot made the audience laugh.

Boss Qu did not laugh.

"Besides, I am truly not afraid of death." He looked up at the screen, the reflections on his mask moved about like flames. "Long ago, in that fire, I had already been burned down to my last breath. This breath had been saved for the Chen family. No matter what happens in the end, I just want to take this out on them."¹

It looked like he was really not afraid of death, which was why he defied the rules of the theater.

Before the movie finished, Boss Qu had already got up and left. Behind him, Ning Ning sat on the audience seat in a daze. It was a long while later that she looked down and opened the folder on her legs.

The rules of Life Theater were not set in stone. Like humans, like a refined artificial intelligence, it would (continually) examine itself. Once it discovered a loophole, it would patch it up.

Coincidentally, it seemed that every time something was patched, they would change the doorman.

In other words, every time a doorman started to have desires they were not supposed to have, did something they were not supposed to do, the theater would hang red lanterns.

"Do you even know that there were red lanterns hanging at the entrance of the theater? They are its warning to you." Ning Ning murmured, "If you were to continue this way, it would change its doorman."

As to which rule Boss Qu intended to defy? She was only afraid that...it was the rule of not being allowed to kill the stowaway.

A month passed by very quickly.

In the same movie theater.

Celebrities gathered, the seats were filled, looking across the theater, even the aisles were filled with standing audiences. The staff members had to check everyone's tickets one by one again, bringing out the stowaways that had mixed in with the crowd and away from the place.

The backstage was in chaos.

"Where's my headdress? Where did my headdress go?"

"Quickly! Quickly help me look for it! Are my eyebrows crooked?"

"Is everyone ready? We are going on stage soon."

Ning Ning was also at the backstage.

Due to the fact that they would be acting in a play and not a movie, their makeup was extremely exaggerated—garish and gorgeous colours were spread on her face, she looked like she was wearing a Venice mask.²

"There is an eighty-to-ninety percent chance that he will make his move on you on stage." Ning Ning told Chen Shuang He, "You have to be careful. Protect yourself, run to the audience seats if you feel anything is off."

Then she told Shi Zhong Tang, "Protect him well."

Chen Shuang He and Shi Zhong Tang exchanged looks. Shi Zhong Tang asked her with a smile, "What's the matter? It's like you're entrusting your child to me before you die... Did Boss Qu say anything to you?"

Ning Ning nodded, then shook her head.

"I tried to persuade him, but he wouldn't listen." Ning Ning sighed, gazing at Boss Qu's direction. "In this play, there is an eighty to ninety percent chance something will happen."

Boss Qu gazed at her from a distance before he followed Qu Yan to

the stage.

Amidst the applause, the curtains were pulled open from each side, revealing the court behind it.

The court was extremely dim. The bench, the plaintiff seat and the witness stand were all empty—only at the dock sat a white-haired man, it was Qu Yan dressed as an old man. He wore an extremely old and torn Chinese tunic suit,³ both his hands and feet were cuffed, he was sitting in a forward bend position on the chair.

The sound of a gavel rang out, a dignified voice followed, "Zhu Yan, why did you kill Romeo?"

"Romeo?" Qu Yan repeated the word, slowly looking up.

"First, you used despicable methods to take away his assets, slander his reputation, transforming him from a human into a street rat." That dignified voice said, "Then you killed him just like killing a rat, why?"

"Why?" Qu Yan slowly stood up from his seat. He looked up and gazed at the bench, raising his hand and shouting, "Because he killed my daughter!!"

"Nonsense! Your daughter clearly died in a car accident!"

"If he had not eloped with my daughter, if they had not met with an accident while eloping, would my daughter have died?" Qu Yan shouted angrily, "He only saved himself! He did not save my daughter! My cute, pitiful Juliet..."

A sigh rang out from behind him, "Papa."

Qu Yan turned around quickly. He saw Ning Ning standing behind him in a white wedding dress, her hands held a blood red bouquet, her blood had not only dyed the flowers red, it dyed her dress red as well.

"Juliet!" Qu Yan reached his hands out towards her, but Ning Ning was holding the bouquet, walking away from him. She did not walk towards the backstage area, walking across the stage instead. Amidst the cries of the audience, she walked to the audience seats.

Director Chen was also sitting in the audience seats, his lips curved upwards ever so slightly from the cries of the audience. Li Shan Zhu who was sitting beside him congratulated him, "Director Chen, the publicity this time is successful again...hmm?"

Ning Ning walked past the "Ghost Seat" that had been prepared for her. She took a glance at it dully. She walked towards the exit instead

of sitting down.

Director Chen stood up. "Where are you going?"

Ning Ning took a look back at him, then she simply lifted her dress up and started running.

"Aiya."

"Excuse me."

She had accidentally bumped into people along the way. Once Ning Ning said her apology, she was stupefied. Standing in front of her was Ning Yu Ren and a young Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked at them for a moment. She noticed all of a sudden that Director Chen was chasing her, so she frantically ran away.

"Ah, Yu Ren, you are here."

"Please call me Miss Ning, thank you."

Director Chen did not chase after her. Ning Ning successfully ran out of the door, she then laboriously got rid of the reporters outside the door and got on a taxi before she had time to answer Chen Shuang He's call.

"Where are you going?" Chen Shuang He asked.

"My scene is already done, there's not much use for me to stay around." Ning Ning took a deep breath and told him, "I want to go to the next place."

"What place."

"Life Theater."

Life Theater exists in every era, this era was no exception. Ning Ning carefully walked in. She was afraid that once she entered she would be immediately sent back to reality. It was a good thing that the situation with <<Sneaking In>> was special. She breathed a sigh of relief and looked up at the dark screen in front of her.

Thirty days time was enough for her to do a lot of things. For example, finishing reading the folder Teacher Li gave her.

Its predecessor had left a lot of information on Life Theater, the most valuable one was...

"I want to meet your owner." Ning Ning said.

Based on the records of the predecessor, the theater was not something without an owner. In many of the strange tales, in many of the predecessors' notes, besides masks, masked people, and a doorman, the opera house also had an owner.

There were very few records regarding the owner. Based on the records, the owner didn't seem to be a single person. It changed in every era. In troubled times, the owner could change up to four to five times sometimes. This showed that the owners were all flesh and blood, they were most probably all mortals.

Ning Ning waited for a long while. The theater was silent, no one spoke, all the masked people were lurking in the darkness, staring at her silently through their masks.

"If you have no owner at the moment..." Ning Ning clenched her fists tightly, because of nervousness, her voice was a little husky, "I am willing to accept your test..."

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Who could stop the doorman? Who could order the doorman around? Besides the theater itself, it would have to be the owner.

Based on the information she had on hand, since the Republic era up till now, records of the owner had not appeared. Did that mean that...the previous owner was already dead? Life Theater was without an owner now?

"If I pass the test..." Ning Ning looked at the screen like a gambler, besides that, she did not have a better idea, no other...she could only solve the problem at the source, "Please let me be your owner."

Just as her voice fade out, a pillar of light shone down within the theater, shining directly on Ning Ning. The sudden burst of light made Ning Ning squint her eyes, she took two steps back involuntarily, but ultimately, wherever she backed up to the spotlight would follow her.

Clap, clap, clap. A masked person gradually started clapping, the masked people beside him seemed to be influenced by him and clapped along with him. Amidst their applause, a man's voice rang out in the darkness.

Ning Ning had heard that voice before, it appeared during the masked people's night of revelry, the sound quality was very weird, it sounded like a child for a moment, a teenager the next, a young adult one moment, an old man the next, it finally fixed itself on the young adult voice, asking her slowly, "Are you willing to gamble your entire life? To accept my test?"

1There's a wordplay here, getting back at someone literally translates into breathing out this breath.

2Venetian masks can be made of leather, porcelain or using the original glass technique. The original masks were rather simple in design, decoration, and often had a symbolic and practical function. Nowadays, most Italian masks are made with the application of gesso and gold leaf and are hand-painted using natural feathers and gems to decorate.

3The modern Chinese tunic suit is a style of male attire originally known in China as the Zhongshan suit after the republican leader Sun Yat-sen. Sun Yat-sen introduced the style shortly after the founding of the Republic of China (1912-1949) as a form of national dress with distinct political overtones. The four pockets are said to represent the Four Virtues of propriety, justice, honesty, and shame; and the five buttons the branches of China's government (Executive, Legislative, Judicial, Examination, Control).

Chapter 140

140: Qualifications to be the Owner

< <After Juliet's Death> > play was ongoing. Backstage.

Chen Shuang He made a phone call a few more times, all of them rang for a long time. He turned around and told Shi Zhong Tang, "It's not working, she's not picking up."

Shi Zhong Tang did not say anything, he looked a little reticent.

"Why not..." Chen Shuang He hesitated for a moment before he said, "you go to look for her?"

At this time, the sound of the gavel rang out from the stage, the dignified voice called out, "Plaintiff, the soul of Romeo! Take the stand!"

"Let's go." Chen Shuang He gave Shi Zhong Tang a pat on his back. Then, amidst the applause of the audience, he slowly walked to the stage.

He was wearing a white suit, his face too was painted in snow white color, only his chest was red. It represented his state as a spirit, the cause of death was a knife to his chest.

The applause gradually stopped. He stood at the plaintiff seat, looking at the dock from a distance.

Qu Yan stood at the dock. Behind him...stood a true spirit.

"Romeo," the dignified voice asked, "do you still recognise the man in front of you?"

"...Murderer!" Chen Shuang He pointed at Qu Yan. "You are the murderer who killed me!"

"You are also the murderer!" Qu Yan slammed the table with both his hands and roared at him in rage, "The murderer who killed my daughter!"

The two of them started hurling abuses at each other, the hitting sound of the gavel rang out repeatedly. "Silence! Silence! Romeo, state the cause of your death!"

"The cause of my death is..." Chen Shuang He's eyes shifted away

from Qu Yan uncontrollably, shifting onto Boss Qu who was behind him, his voice paused. He abruptly remembered that he was (still) on stage, frantically continuing, "A stab to my heart, by him, using a knife..."

Boss Qu walked past Qu Yan, walking towards Chen Shuang He step by step.

Both his arms hung by his sides naturally, he was not holding a knife. But even without a knife, he was still a very dangerous person. As he walked closer, Chen Shuang He's heart beat faster, he could not help but take a step back.

...No, he could not retreat. < <After Juliet's Death> > was already his last chance, he definitely could not get off the stage under the watchful eyes of the audience.

Besides, didn't Shi Zhong Tang say that although the doorman could mess up his life, he could not kill him...

"Did Shi Zhong Tang tell you that I wouldn't dare kill you?" Boss Qu stood still in front of Chen Shuang He and laughed.

Chen Shuang He was flabbergasted.

"I just didn't want to do it too early." As Boss Qu finished, he swiftly reached out and grabbed Chen Shuang He's neck, laughing coldly. "Now, I am done admiring your penniless and miserable look...I can send you on your way."

Cries rang out from the audience below the stage. They could not see Boss Qu, so what they saw was Chen Shuang He—as if he had triggered some kind of sickness—his neck was all straightened up, both his hands were tearing at his neck.

"Enough." A knife was suddenly lodged in Boss Qu's neck. He coughed once, loosened his grip uncontrollably and took a step back. He glared at the newcomer. "Shi Zhong Tang..."

"Haven't you had enough?" Shi Zhong Tang stood in front of Chen Shuang He and smiled at Boss Qu. "You have already had people take all the roles who made him whom he was, seized all of his connections, now you want his life as well? Isn't that too much? For my sake, let him off."

"For your sake?" Boss Qu let out a big cold laugh. His shoulders shook. He held up both fists, his fingers making cracking sounds.

Shi Zhong Tang also held up a boxing stance. "If you won't back down, then you leave me with no choice."

He was answered by a ruthless fist.

The two invisible men started fighting on stage.

Shi Zhong Tang could be considered a professionally trained fighter. For the sake of his roles, he had learned from famous teachers. No matter if it was swordsmanship or Chinese martial arts, he dabbled in all of them, he was even an amateur boxer. On the contrary, Boss Qu certainly did not have the same type of qualifications. He was from the underworld, his skills were gained from real fights. Although his moves were not pretty, he would win in viciousness.

The two were locked in a titanic struggle. They first knocked over the backdrop of the plaintiff's seat, then they knocked over the backdrop of the dock. A number of people were shouting:

"What's going on?"

"Is it special effects?"

"Did spirits really appear?"

"You want to die too?" Boss Qu's fist landed on Shi Zhong Tang's temple. He took this opportunity—while Shi Zhong Tang's head was spinning—to press him down to the ground, he half squatted fiercely. "Stop me again, I'll kill you along with him!"

After he finished speaking, he looked up towards Chen Shuang He. Just as he got up and walked towards him, Shi Zhong Tang grabbed his arm.

"Ning Ning went to Life Theater." Even though Shi Zhong Tang was covered in injuries, he still had a nonchalant look. He laid on the floor, looking up at Boss Qu as he smiled. "Do you think she can convince the theater to get it to end this screening of < < Sneaking In > > early?"

Boss Qu was startled, he then laughed out loud.

"Everyone wants to get in my way, even her!" He broke free from Shi Zhong Tang's grasp and slowly walked towards Chen Shuang He. His footsteps were heavy, it was as if he had a certain person's corpse on his back, his eyes were red with hatred. "Unless you burn me till there were not even ashes left of me...otherwise, this hatred will last beyond death!"

Along with his words, someone shouted, "There's a fire!"

At first, everyone thought that someone was messing around, but another person followed up. "Ah! Fire!" Another added, "Run quickly!"

All the people on the audience seats got up in an instant. Like the sound of a rising tide, screams rang out from all directions. The sound of footsteps were chaotic as they surged towards the exit like a wave.

Qu Yan saw this from the stage, then he also frantically jumped off from the stage and ran for his life. Chen Shuang He on the other hand was not moving as he crouched in a corner of the stage. A shout rang out in the next second, he looked towards the direction of the sound and saw that Shi Zhong Tang had reined in Boss Qu by grabbing his neck from the back. He cursed and swore a few times before he shouted at Chen Shuang He, "What are you still crouching there for? You can't be of help to me, quickly, start running for your life."

Chen Shuang He took two looks at him before he finally gritted his teeth and jumped off the stage to run for his life.

Behind him, Shi Zhong Tang took a step back as he was struck with an elbow by Boss Qu. Boss Qu jumped off the stage as well and chased after Chen Shuang He.

At the same time, Life Theater.

"Yes." Facing the question of the man, Ning Ning answered.

The man's voice could not be heard for a very long time. Within the darkness, it was like there was a pair of eyes measuring her up carefully and fastidiously.

"Honestly speaking, your qualifications are nothing to shout about." His voice rang out again after a very long while, "Not to mention the first owner, all the owners who followed after were amazing. Compared to them, you are too ordinary in all aspects... But seeing that you are the first person in a century to apply for the position, I will give you a chance."

"...Thank you." Ning Ning clenched her fists tightly with her sweaty palms.

The situation she currently faced was just like being in an interview which she was at a great disadvantage in.

Ning Ning was facing a situation of a professional mismatch. She was unfamiliar with the situation of the theater and the main business model, she had no relevant working experience either, along with other problems.

The only advantage she had was—there were no competitors, so she had immediately gotten to the final stage.

"First, answer my question." The man asked, "Why do you want to

be my owner?"

This question was similar to: Why do you want to work for our company?

Ning Ning could certainly go for the cliché like: I have admired your movie theater for a very long time, my only wish in life is to slog my guts out for the theater without pay, so on and so forth...

Would anyone believe her if she said that?

Most importantly, were these highfalutin jargons what the theater wanted to hear?

"...I have a lot of things I want from the theater. For example, I want to end this screening of <<Sneaking In>> early, I want my Mama to not be bedridden for some ten years." Ning Ning babbled on, she looked in front of her carefully after every wish she had stated.

The man listened to everything she said patiently, then told her as he laughed, "I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. Some things—even if you were to become the owner—cannot be changed."

Ning Ning was taken aback, "Then what could the owner do?"

"The rights of the owner are..." The man suddenly stopped as he got to that part.

Ning Ning waited for a very long time but he would not continue, she could only ask him, "What are they?"

"...Nothing." To her surprise, the man actually said, "You can go back now."

Ning Ning did not know why he had a sudden change in attitude, but the interview was already halfway through, how could she leave just like that, she frantically asked, "Why? Didn't you say you would give me a chance?"

"There's no need." The man rejected her, he laughed pointedly. "If you want to become my owner, you have to at least satisfy a prerequisite."

Ning Ning was taken aback. "What prerequisite?"

The man said, "You have to at least be a living person."

<<After Juliet's Death>> play was suspended, outside the entrance.

The entrance was like a vomiting mouth, vomiting people out continuously. Every person who had been vomited out didn't look

good. Celebrities from all walks of life all looked worried, some of them ruined their makeup from crying, some of them were black from the smoke, but even so, those who were able to come out were the lucky ones, there were still a number of people who were stuck inside.

Found him!

Boss Qu pushed away the fatso that was blocking his way, his eyes staring straight at Chen Shuang He who was not far ahead of him.

Chen Shuang He wanted to run, but a fat woman was clinging on to him.

"Help me." The fat woman had attempted to stop every person in front of her but had failed to do so. She finally decided to just grab onto Chen Shuang He, crying as she told him, "My daughter is still in there, I beg of you, save her!"

Boss Qu let out a loud cold laugh, he walked towards Chen Shuang He. When he walked past a woman, he plucked her pseudo-antique hairpin off her hair, the tip of the hairpin was very blunt, but if it were to stab into someone's eye, that person would still die.

Just as he was about to walk up to Chen Shuang He's side, Ning Yu Ren's screams rang out beside him, "Let go of me!"

Boss Qu was stunned for a moment. He looked back and saw Director Chen—with ashes and soot on his face—dragging and pulling Ning Yu Ren out from the door, but Ning Yu Ren did not appreciate it at all. She scratched his face with her fingernails, her hair that was tied in a bun had long been scattered out. She shouted at the door gut-wrenchingly, "My daughter is still in there!!"

Little Theater:

Ah Xia: The one who lives at the end is the true male lead!

Movie Theater: The one who lives at the end is my true owner!

Ah Xia: Good theater!

Movie Theater: Good Ah Xia!

Chapter 141

141: The Final Boundary

Boss Qu looked in the direction she was looking.

Previously, all he cared about was to chase after Chen Shuang He. It was not until his eyes left Chen Shuang He that he realised that there were so many people at the entrance, so many parents.

There was a person repeatedly shouting their child's name at the entrance, some opened a bottle of mineral water, poured it over their heads, then ignored the people around them stopping them as they rushed in.

"Ning Ning!" Ning Yu Ren struggled in Director Chen's arms. "Let go of me! I want to save Ning Ning!"

"Wait for the firefighters to get here!" Director Chen would not let go. "You are a national-treasure-level actress, you cannot take such a risk! You have to stay here!"

Ning Yu Ren could not break free, she looked back and shouted at him defeatedly, "Aren't you worried at all? Your son is in there too!"

Director Chen was shocked for a moment, then shrugged. He started laughing in a carefree manner, as if he was saying: I'm a national-treasure-level director, how can I risk my life just for a puny Chen Shuang He?

"...And why should I take the risk?" Boss Qu told himself, "All of them are other people's children. What have their deaths got to do with me? Inside...there's no daughter of mine anyway..."

He turned around and chased after Chen Shuang He. He only took two steps before abruptly turning around and rushing into the door.

The heat wave that hit him in the face made him take a few steps back. Most of the people had already escaped, but there were still a number of people in the theater. Coughing sound, crying sound, pleading sound, Boss Qu went looking towards the sounds of the cries of one of the children. He lifted the girl off the ground, her face was already black from the smoke. Boss Qu rubbed her face, but he could not clean it off, thus he asked frantically, "Are you Ning Ning?"

The girl was scared stiff from what was happening right in front of

her eyes. There was clearly no one in front of her, but what had picked her up from the floor? It had even rubbed her face.

"Wa—" The girl pursed her lips then cried out loud, "Mama!!"

Boss Qu swore under his breath. He put her down and walked away a few steps before turning back and lifting her up. He quickly walked to the entrance and casually tossed her out of the door.

The girl was thrown on the floor, the fat woman who had been clinging on to Chen Shuang He rushed over. She hugged the girl and cried, "Xiao Lin! Xiao Lin! It's good that you are fine... Ah!"

Another girl was thrown out of the theater, the girl just happened to fall on top of her.

Afterwards, people were tossed out consecutively, yet no one could clearly see who had rescued them, they could not even see the black marks left on the floor, the remains of burnt tapes.

"Cough, cough." Boss Qu coughed loudly. He had already forgotten how many times he had re-entered the theater. *Damn it, where exactly is Ning Ning?* He scooped up another girl with one arm. He used another hand to cover her face with a wet cloth then walked towards a seat not far from him. Beneath the chair was an intermittent coughing, the voice was very delicate, it was most probably a child.

Before he could arrive, a hand pulled the child out from under the seat and put them in their arms.

It was Shi Zhong Tang, he was also rescuing them.

Boss Qu stared at the girl in his arms and asked, "Is that Ning Ning?"

The girl had already half-fainted. Shi Zhong Tang turned her face around and took a look, then let her continue to rest on his chest. He turned around and told Boss Qu, "No."

Boss Qu was extremely disappointed. After he sent the person in his arms out, he looked down at his right hand. Three of his fingers were missing, there was only unburnt tape remaining, falling from his hand, section by section.

"What exactly am I doing?" He murmured, "My hands...are clearly not meant for things like this..."

"Ning Ning!"

Boss Qu turned his head. He saw Ning Yu Ren rushed to his side and lifted up the girl he had just rescued, then cried, "No, not Ning

Ning..."

She looked around in a daze. There were already quite a number of people who had been rescued, but Ning Ning was not one of them.

Ning Yu Ren used the back of her hand to wipe her tears, then slowly got up and walked towards the entrance. Before she could get there however, Director Chen held her back.

"Let go!" Ning Yu Ren screamed, "Don't mention anything about national treasure or movies to me! I just want my daughter! I would rather die with her in there!"

Director Chen knew that he would not be able to persuade her, he simply did not say a word and held onto her tightly.

"...I hate you." Ning Yu Ren could not break free. Slowly, she turned her head and looked at him with eyes filled with hatred. "If Ning Ning were to die, I will never act in your movies again, you'll never see me again, I'll not help you bear the consequences of the shameful deeds you did, I hate you, I will hate you for all eternity!"

I will hate you for all eternity!

This hatred will never cease!

"No, I don't hate you." Ning Yu Ren suddenly murmured again. She looked down and sobbed. "If only I did not bring her here to watch this play, if only I did not let go of her hand...Ah!! I hate it so much!! Why, why can I not even protect my own daughter?!"

Boss Qu stared at Ning Yu Ren for a moment. He seemed to have thought something through all of a sudden. He let out a desolate laughter before turning around and walking into the theater.

"Where are you going?" Shi Zhong Tang shouted from behind, "The firefighters are almost here!"

He was too late. The back view of Boss Qu had already disappeared into the sea of flames, Shi Zhong Tang sighed helplessly. Just as he was about to go in after him, the voice of a teenage girl suddenly rang out behind him, "Mama!"

He looked back and saw a teenage Ning Ning rush into Ning Yu Ren's arms.

"Ning Ning." Ning Yu Ren knelt on the floor, tears were streaming down her face ceaselessly as she hugged the other. It was only a while later that she looked up to the middle-aged man in front of her. "Thank you! Thank you so much! I only have this daughter, she is my

life!"

"No need, no need." The middle-aged man frantically waved his hands. Beside him stood a fat woman who was holding the girl named Xiao Lin, smiling at Ning Yu Ren. "Disasters bring people together. My child was also rescued by someone else, there are so many good people in this world... Ah, the firefighters are here!"

The crowd quickly gave way, the firefighters rushed in one after another.

Not long after, the remaining people had been rescued. Besides the one person who had died on the spot, the three others who had been heavily injured were sent to the hospital with their loved ones accompanying them. Shi Zhong Tang, on the other hand, walked to the entrance, because he knew that there was one person who was definitely impossible to rescue.

The movie theater that was previously so majestic and splendid was now just a pitch black room, a wreckage.

Shi Zhong Tang found a bundle of tapes in the midst of this wreckage.

The tapes were close to being completely burnt up, a snow white mask quietly laid among the black ashes, the mask had a few cracks from being burnt.

"I could not find her." Boss Qu's voice suddenly rang out behind the mask, sounding quite frail.

"She's fine now," Shi Zhong Tang slowly bent down, "someone had saved her."

Boss Qu breathed a sigh of relief, then he chuckled. "Why did no one save Ning'er? Is it really true that good things happen to those who do good things and bad things happen to evil doers?"

Shi Zhong Tang fell silent, he did not know how to answer him.

"Shi Zhong Tang," Boss Qu also fell silent for a moment, then he said dully, "congratulations, I'm about to die, your wish can come true now."

Shi Zhong Tang was taken aback, he laughed bitterly. "I only wanted you to lose, I didn't want you to die."

"It doesn't matter anymore," Boss Qu said, "I'll make my will here. I'll leave Ning Ning to you, you have to treat her well, tell her... Forget it, you don't have to tell her anything."

"We've already reached this juncture in time." Shi Zhong Tang urged, "What do you want me to convey?"

The mask did not make any sound for a long time. Just as Shi Zhong Tang thought the other had died, he slowly said, "...There's a shop that sells masks across the theater, go there and buy one, then tell her..."

His voice was getting quieter and quieter, smaller and smaller, Shi Zhong Tang could only hear clearly by bending down to the ground, putting his ear up to the mask.

"Alright," Boss Qu said, "leave, I don't want a fellow like you to see me off."

Shi Zhong Tang got up as he laughed bitterly. Just as he took a few steps, a voice rang out behind him, "Hold on."

He looked back and looked at the mask on the floor.

Smoke rose from the mask, Boss Qu's voice was lighter and further away than the smoke, he said, "If I were to choose again, I would not have chosen to be the doorman. That way, there might have been a way to save Ning'er... You should be careful too. I don't know why, but sometimes Life Theater would mislead us, make us take... the path that goes against... our true wish..."

Within Life Theater.

Ning Ning was arguing with the man. Or more accurately, she was arguing with herself, the man did not pay her any heed at all. Ning Ning's mouth was almost dry from talking. Just as she was about to give up, the man suddenly said, "Congratulations, you passed the first test."

Ning Ning was stunned, "What did I do? Or what did I say? How did I pass the test?"

"The first test," the man corrected, "you have satisfied the prerequisite of being the owner—you have to be a living person."

Ning Ning furrowed her brows, she did not understand what he said. "I have been alive all this while."

The man laughed, he did not explain anything to her, he said instead, "Next is the second test, also the most important test—I want a new doorman."

A new doorman.

"Then...what about the old doorman?" Ning Ning asked.

The man asked as he laughed, "What do you think?"

Ning Ning stared at the darkness within the screen for half an instant, before abruptly taking out her phone and walking towards the entrance as she made a call.

The phone rang for a very long time before it finally connected.

"Why is it so noisy over your side?" Ning Ning frowned. "What happened?"

The noise of people, police cars, ambulances—Chen Shuang He's voice was mixed into this noise, it was hard to make out what he was saying. He said, "The theater just caught fire."

"Caught fire? Are you alright?" Ning Ning asked anxiously, "Was anyone hurt?"

Chen Shuang He hesitated for a moment, "Most of the people are fine, a few people are not..."

Ning Ning stopped in her tracks, she looked at the man in front of her.

Under the setting sun, a blood red sun, Shi Zhong Tang slowly walked over from across the street. After standing still in front of her, he took out a mask from behind him and handed it over to her.

Ning Ning looked down at the mask.

It was a cheap, ten-dollar-a-piece, spotless snow white mask.

"We won." Shi Zhong Tang said, "As punishment, he turned into this."

Ning Ning hung up on the call. She slowly reached out and grabbed the mask.

"He was very angry," Shi Zhong Tang continued to report what Boss Qu said, "he said that the next time he turns back into a masked person, he would definitely not be soft again. If the two of us were to stop him again, he would kill both of us as well."

Ning Ning was shocked. "He really said that?"

"Yes." After Shi Zhong Tang finished speaking, he could not help but add a few words, "Maybe he was just saying it..."

The both of them fell silent for a moment. Shi Zhong Tang was the one who broke the silence at last, "Let's go, we should go to the projector room...let's hang him up together."

Without allowing any explanation, he held Ning Ning's hand all the way to the projector room. They found a space amidst the wall full of masks, he then let Ning Ning hang up the mask herself.

Ning Ning had her back to Shi Zhong Tang, he could not see her expression at this moment.

"He's still alive, right?" Ning Ning asked.

"That's right." Shi Zhong Tang lied, "He can see you, hear you, he just can't speak."

"Then can I come here frequently in the future to talk to him?" As Ning Ning finished speaking, she dropped her shoulders dejectedly. "Oh, I forgot. I don't have any more tickets... Can you talk to him often for me?"

"Alright." Shi Zhong Tang hugged her from behind. "I will come frequently to accompany him, I'll tell more jokes to this old man."

The two of them cuddled up with each other until Ning Ning's body gradually transformed, gradually turning from Zhao Yu Fen's body to her original body.

"I'm much better now." Ning Ning sniffled and said, "Let's go out."

The two of them walked out of the projector room, Ning Ning looked at the scenery in front of her and was astonished.

The audience seats were deserted, popcorn boxes and the burnt out sparklers were scattered on the floor, there were still a few colourful balloons floating in the air. Everything was there, except for one thing...

"Where are the masked people?" Ning Ning turned her head to look at Shi Zhong Tang.

"They should have all left," Shi Zhong Tang said blandly, "there is no more Doorman after all."

Ning Ning was shocked, she walked out of the entrance of the theater frantically. The rain had stopped, there were already pedestrians walking on the streets, they seemed to be returning from supper. Some pedestrians walked in front of Ning Ning as they talked and laughed, one of them turned their head and looked at Ning Ning, their face was covered by a crying mask.

Ning Ning took a step back in shock, she bumped into a firm chest.

She looked at and saw Shi Zhong Tang who was also wearing a mask, looking down at her and smiling. "There is no one who could

stop us anymore."

The crying mask in front of her took a glance at them before quickly turning their head back and following the pedestrians. Ning Ning watched them from the back, they most probably didn't know that there was one more person beside them at all.

Under the moonlight, the crowd of the laughing people, the shadows that were swaying on the ground...in their wake, there was an extra shadow. It signified one thing.

Between Life Theater and reality, the final boundary had disappeared.

Chapter 142

142: One Extra Person

Recently, for some reason, the amount of people who were visiting psychiatrists had increased.

"I feel that...there seemed to be one more person at home." The woman in front seemed quite neurotic, since she sat down, she had not stopped looking around. "When I return home everyday, the things at home would all be in different positions."

"Madam Qin, could you have remembered wrongly?" Wen Yu asked her, "Sometimes a person's memory would be erroneous, could you have used these things but forgotten about them?"

"I didn't remember wrongly." The woman said, "I could have put my phone at a random spot after I played with it, but I could not have emptied half of the items in my refrigerator then forget to replace them after."

"When was the refrigerator emptied?" Wen Yu asked.

"At night I think." The woman rubbed her face, she looked very frail, it seemed to be because she had stayed up all night in fear. "When I woke up, all the bottles I placed in there were opened, especially the beers, they were all opened."

Wen Yu made a note on his book.

"What do you think?" The woman leaned over and looked at him. "Should I call the police?"

If you wanted to call the police, you would not have come to a psychiatrist in the first place. Wen Yu looked up at her and said, "This might be a case of somnambulism."

The woman leaned back on the chair again as she sighed. "You think so too?"

"It's not certain," Wen Yu said, "I suggest that before you sleep tonight, place a video camera or a phone so that you record everything that happens after you fall asleep."

It was almost afternoon break time once he sent this customer away, Wen Yu came out from his office, he was a little stiff from

sitting for the whole morning, he pressed on his shoulders a little. Just as he was about to go out for lunch, the door beside him suddenly opened, a psychiatrist came out holding their stomach, upon seeing Wen Yu, they frantically grabbed him.

"Doctor Wen, do me a favour." The other party had a bad expression on their face, their forehead was perspiring. "My stomach is not feeling well today, help me with the customer inside. Thanks, ah..."

Wen Yu shook his head, he forgot about eating lunch as he opened the door and entered. "Hello, something came up for Doctor Liu, I'll take his place for now, this is my name card."

Switching doctors at the last moment, the customer seemed a little uncomfortable. He had his arms crossed, his right leg was shaking non-stop, he was obviously weary.

He took Wen Yu's name card in his hands, took a look and tossed it to the side, then said as he chewed on bubblegum, "Forget it, I'm holding on to an anxiety, I just want to pour it out to someone...you won't tell anyone what I say right?"

"I won't." Wen Yu smiled. "We have professional integrity, we will keep what you say confidential."

"That's good..." The man breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Truth be told, I am the video editor of a production crew, to be honest...I think there is an extra person on the crew."

"Oh?" Wen Yu blinked once, he seemed to have heard the same thing from another person. He asked, "What person exactly?"

"How would I know?" The man complained, he rubbed his own hair and said, "The people online all thought that there was something wrong with my editing, but that was not something I did, I don't have such capability!"

Wen Yu poured a cup of hot water for the other, trying his best to placate his emotions. "Can you tell me what exactly happened in detail?"

"See for yourself." The man took out his phone and tapped on a video for him to watch.

Wen Yu was open-minded to others' beliefs, he took the phone and took a look, it was playing a sequel to a very popular show, titled < < Big Brother's Lover 2 > > . The lead actors and director had been changed, but to draw popularity, the lead actors from the previous

season made a cameo in the first episode.

Wen Yu saw a familiar face—Ning Ning.

"Watch closely." The man was beside him before he could notice, looking down at the video. "One minute fifty seconds."

At a minute and forty seconds, Ning Ning appeared in the female lead's flashback.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" The man shouted as he reached out with a finger, pointing at Ning Ning's waist and said, "Look here."

Actually, he did not need to point it out specifically, a screenful of bullet chats had already pointed out what was different in this scene. Wen Yu turned off the bullet chat, then looked closely at Ning Ning's waist.

He gradually saw what was different.

"Look at the crease on her clothes," the man asked, "doesn't it look like a person's hand?"

Ning Ning was speaking to the female lead on the screen, there was clearly no third party nearby, but a crease slowly appeared on the waist area of Ning Ning's clothes. It looked like a hand had reached out from behind her and gently placed itself on her waist.

"Could it be an accident?" Wen Yu turned his head to look at him. "Did a gust of wind kick up while they were filming?"

"This was an indoor shoot." The man looked at him as if he was dumb. "If there was wind, how could it only be on her and not the female lead in front of her? Watch what happens next."

Wen Yu looked at the video again, then his eyes widened with surprise.

The crease on Ning Ning's waist, it had changed.

At first it was in the shape of a hand, then when followed closely, the crease started moving slowly like a snake, like an arm slowly wrapping around her from behind, interlocking at her waist.

Ning Ning remained smiling, her right hand that was touching her earring suddenly smacked downwards.

"Smack!"

At the same time, at the backstage of a certain new show that was in the midst of filming.

Shi Zhong Tang wagged his hand around as he grinned cheekily. "That hurts."

Ning Ning sat down on a chair. She glanced back at him, holding her phone in one hand as she typed on it with the other: [There are people watching, keep your hands to yourself.]

"But I'm bored." Shi Zhong Tang slowly bent down and laid down on the chair. "Chat with me?"

Ning Ning wrote on the phone: [Then I would be sent to the mental hospital very quickly.]

"Sigh, how troublesome." Shi Zhong Tang stretched lazily. He looked at his surroundings as time hung heavy on his hands. All of a sudden, his vision was fixed on a person, he smiled and said, "I'll go play over there."

"Hey! Hey!" Ning Ning shouted at him frantically. Seeing that the makeup artist was looking at her with a strange look, she frantically coughed. "Hey...that person over there, can you bring me a bottle of water?"

The staff member brought her a bottle of mineral water very quickly. Ning Ning opened the bottle and casually took two sips before closing it up. The makeup artist continued to put on makeup for her as Ning Ning's vision occasionally shifted to Shi Zhong Tang's direction.

This fellow was simply like the monkey that had just been released from Five Finger Mountain¹, everything was fresh, he wanted to try everything. She saw that he was by the side of a veteran actor who was catching a wink, sneakily tying the old man's white beard into braids. He was behind the male lead at the next instant and started to act according to the script in his hands.

"Close your eyes." The makeup artist held a mascara brush in their hand.

Ning Ning closed her eyes, she felt the brush slowly caress her eyelashes.

"Ah!!" There was a sudden screech, her eyelashes trembled, the makeup artist exclaimed, they frantically grabbed a cotton swab from the table and slowly dabbed the corner of Ning Ning's eyes.

Ning Ning, on the other hand, looked towards the direction of the screeching noise, it was actually the assistant director? Hold on, why was Shi Zhong Tang standing behind him? Why did he look smug? He

was even waving at her.

When Shi Zhong Tang came over, Ning Ning frantically showed him her phone, written on it was: [What did you do to Director Han?]

"He wrote a harassment message." Shi Zhong Tang said with a smile, "I helped him broadcast it."

Ning Ning was astonished, she opened WeChat to take a look in a frenzy.

[Pretty little lady, you must be tired today right? Come to my room tonight, I'll make you feel comfortable.]

It simply blew the internet apart.

Shi Zhong Tang did not send this hook up message to the crew's group chat, but into another work group chat instead. Not only did the other group chat have active directors, there were also many presently popular stars—thus, not long after the message was sent, replies soon followed.

Director Chen, "..."

Chen Shuang He, "..."

Director Han, "This is for my wife! Sorry, sorry, I accidentally sent it to the wrong chat!!"

Before he could finish explaining, Director Cui who was in charge of the show had appeared on set, shouting at Assistant Director Han with a foul expression, "Little Han, come over for a minute!"

Ning Ning watched him leave, Shi Zhong Tang's laughter rang out beside her. He said with a wide grin, "Praise me."

Just as Ning Ning was about to take out her phone, a hand had already pressed down on her hand.

"Look at me." Shi Zhong Tang bent down and looked straight at her. "Talk to me."

Ning Ning looked at him helplessly and said, "Thank you."

Shi Zhong Tang immediately started smiling, he reached out and hugged her.

He was so easily satisfied that it made her feel a little guilty.

As if he knew what she was thinking of, Shi Zhong Tang hugged her tightly. "It's fine, I'm already very blessed now. You can at least see me, talk to me, so I...am more blessed than most of the other

masked people."

At the same time, in a private home.

A photo frame was placed in the wardrobe. In the photo frame was a couple, wearing a set of blue couple's clothes, each holding a bottle of beer. Behind them were spectacular fireworks, they clinked bottles under the fireworks.

A masked person stood in front of the photo frame. A rabbit mask was on his face, he was wearing the exact same blue clothes as the man in the photo frame. He used a gentle and reminiscent expression as he looked at the photo frame. The sound of the opening door rang out beside him, he turned over and was stunned by what he saw.

The woman who had visited Wen Yu's psychiatrist clinic in the morning—Madam Qin—stood at the entrance hall doorway. She placed two pairs of slippers on the floor and smiled with her head tilted to the side. "I'm counting on you tonight."

A tall man stood beside her, carrying a video camera over his shoulders. He changed his shoes and smiled at her. "Leave it to me."

"You're not afraid at all?" Madam Qin blinked at him. "The doctor said that I might sleepwalk."

"I'm not afraid." The man brought her into his arms. He looked down at her and said, "I'll give you a kiss to wake you up when that happens."

The two of them kissed.

Their kissing figures were reflected on the pure white rabbit mask.

The original owner of this house was staring coldly at them through the mask at this moment.

1This is a reference to a part where the Monkey King Sun Wu Kong was trapped under Five Finger Mountain in the Chinese mythology: Journey to the West.

Chapter 143

143: Look at Me

"This was what was recorded last night." Madam Qin placed a video camera on the table, she then played the video for Wen Yu.

In the video, the alarm clock by the bed showed that it was three in the morning, two people were sleeping on the bed. The man was snoring thunderously, Madam Qin who was beside him flipped over.

Visible to the naked eye, the bedsheet by Madam Qin's side suddenly had a dent, as if a person had sat down beside her.

"Doctor Wen, do you think..." Madam Qin folded her arms as she asked Wen Yu, "...that that could have been my husband coming back to visit me?"

"Your husband?" Wen Yu gazed at her.

"My husband passed away five years ago, yesterday was his death anniversary." Madam Qin leaned on the chair, saying with a tone full of reminiscence, "He was five years younger than me. He was a little timid, he would be terrified at the slightest sound, just like a rabbit. That's why I had always been the breadwinner while he took care of the house, I made the decisions for every single thing."

She sighed and continued, "After he passed away, I did not go looking around, other men cannot stand my bossy temper."

Wen Yu listened to her quietly. Not everyone who visited the clinic was a patient. More often than not, they were customers, customers wouldn't visit to cure themselves of illness, they just wanted to divulge their secrets to a psychiatrist who would not spill them out—or one could say, a wooden pillar that could not speak—pouring out their heart.

"Now...I have finally found a man who could accept me." Madam Qin leaned forward and stared at Wen Yu as she asked, "He came back to send me his blessings, right? "

Wen Yu knew what kind of answer she wanted to hear, he was happy to give it to her.

"That's right," Wen Yu said with a smile, "he came back to send you his blessings."

Madam Qin cracked a smile of relief.

"...That's great. I knew it, he would definitely send me his blessings." She reached out and touched the video camera on the table, then looked up and smiled at Wen Yu. "Thank you, Doctor Wen. If there's nothing else, I will go back now."

Madam Qin slung the video camera over her back and walked out, another pair of legs trailed behind her.

"Dear," the man wearing the rabbit mask followed behind her, stammering, "I have not died yet."

"I was trapped in the movie theater in the past. Now that I have gotten out, we can continue to be together."

"Dear, don't abandon me."

"I beg you, turn back and look at me, I am right here!"

The door opened, the two of them rubbed shoulders with another customer. The customer closed the door on their way in, then sat in front of Wen Yu, it was the video editor from the previous day. He seemed to have not slept well the night before as well, the eyebags under his eyes were even darker.

"This is what I recorded at the set yesterday, take a look." He took out his phone, tapped it a few times and handed it over to Wen Yu, it was currently playing a video.

It was obviously a video that had been taken in secret, the camera was avoiding detection. The main character of the video was Ning Ning.

"Ever since the previous incident, I have been paying close attention to her." The editor stared at the video. "She's definitely not normal!"

Wen Yu looked at Ning Ning in the video, he did not feel that there was anything abnormal with her.

She was sitting quietly on a chair as she looked down and used her phone continuously, she was no different from the smartphone zombie nowadays.

...Hold on. Why did she look to her side every few minutes? There was no one beside her.

"One minute thirty second." The editor pointed out.

At a minute and thirty, Ning Ning suddenly put down her phone

and shouted in a direction, "Hey...that person over there, can you bring me a bottle of water?"

She didn't seem to be thirsty. Once she took the bottle of water, she only took a sip for the sake of doing it before casting her gaze in a direction.

Her vision followed an unregulated line, going in a circle around the crew. It sometimes stopped on the lead actor, other times it stopped at the director beside him.

The camera followed where she was looking at. In the end, Wen Yu saw something inconceivable.

A veteran actor was catching a wink while huddled up on a chair in the corner of the room. Due to the fact that he was not an important character—on top of his position in the room—no one took any notice of him.

"If Ning Ning was not looking at him, I would not have been able to catch what was about to happen." The editor forced out a laughter.

Wen Yu watched the screen closely.

On the screen, the veteran actor had his hands in his sleeves, his head was tilted up, leaning on the chair as he slept soundly.

His beard suddenly moved in an unnatural way.

Under the watchful eyes of Wen Yu and the editor, an invisible hand had braided up the veteran actor's white beard.

The video ended, the two of them looked at each other.

"Doctor Wen," The editor looked at Wen Yu with his panda eyes, "would you say that—that something dirty had gotten mixed into the crew? Also, Ning Ning...does she have yin yang eyes?"

What Ning Ning had was not yin yang eyes.

It was the special privilege of being a "customer".

From when she had taken the first ticket, she was able to see the masked people, the masked people were also able to see her. She seemed to have eliminated the boundaries between them through the ticket in her hands.

In a hospital, Director Shi was lying on a bed with a stomach that looked like it was ten months pregnant. He looked at Ning Ning with a smile. "Ah, why are you here alone today? Did Little Yu not accompany you?"

"Am I not welcomed if I come alone?" Ning Ning said with a smile as she glanced at Shi Zhong Tang beside her.

"Ask him something for me," Shi Zhong Tang touched Director Shi's stomach, "whose child is this?"

How could Ning Ning ask Director Shi something like that? She asked euphemistically, "Director Shi, why does it feel like...compared to the last time I was here...you look more portly?"

Director Shi looked at his surroundings cautiously, then signaled for Ning Ning to come closer. He told her quietly, "Don't tell anyone...I ordered takeout secretly, caramel pudding is so delicious hehehehe!"

"Call the police!" Shi Zhong Tang said coldly, "I spoke too quickly. Quickly report it to the doctors and nurses, let them take a look at this fellow, it would be best if they tape his mouth up, only take the tape off when it's meal time."

...How could Ning Ning suggest such a thing to the doctors! She said euphemistically, "Director Shi, this won't do. Why don't I share with you a vegetarian restaurant I cherish? This store uses vegetables to make all sorts of desserts. Not only are they delicious, they are not detrimental to the body."

"Sure, send it to me." Director Shi said, "That's right, when are you getting married to Little Yu?"

Both Ning Ning and Shi Zhong Tang choked.

"Hey, hey, old man." Shi Zhong Tang immediately knelt in front of him like a husky that had its food taken away from him, saying pitifully, "How can you do this? You are actually helping Little Yu poach her from me? I am your son too! You can't favour him over me, *sob sob*!"

Due to the fact that she had pretended to be a couple with Wen Yu last time, this time Ning Ning could only say very awkwardly, "W—we aren't at that stage yet..."

"What stage are you at?" Director Shi took out his phone. "Forget it, it's not appropriate for me to ask you that, I will ask Little Yu directly."

Don't! Ning Ning shouted in her heart.

In the psychologist clinic, the phone on the table rang. Wen Yu picked it up, took a look and was surprised.

[Ning Ning called me Father-in-law, should I answer to that?]

...Ning Ning, *what are you trying to do?!* Wen Yu covered the phone and looked at the editor in front of him. "Apologies, I have an emergency to attend to, I need to go out and make a call."

After he got the approval of the editor, he quickly rushed to the bathroom then gave Ning Ning a quick call. The phone rang for a long time before it finally connected. He said in a low voice, "Ning Ning, where are you now?"

Outside the ward, Ning Ning answered him as she walked, "I'm at the hospital."

"Why...did you call my father 'father-in-law'?"

"I didn't! I swear to God, I didn't!"

Once both of them hung up the call, Ning Ning's forehead was full of sweat. As she wiped it, she saw Shi Zhong Tang bent over while laughing at the corner of her eyes. She got a little angry in the moment. "What are you laughing about!"

"You must be seeing things, I didn't laugh." Shi Zhong Tang was serious for a second, then, "Pfff—"

Ning Ning wanted to hit him, but she was afraid of attracting the attention of others, so she could only step on his feet repeatedly.

Shi Zhong Tang had experience dealing with the angry girl. He wrapped his arms around Ning Ning's neck and brought her into his chest, he lowered his face that was covered with a jade mask. His lowered voice sounded even more attractive. "Such a good person like my little brother, why would you not choose him? ...Is it because of me?"

"...You're overthinking it." Ning Ning broke free from him. She took a few steps away from him before looking back at him.

Shi Zhong Tang followed her with a smile, the two of them walked into the stairs access door one after another.

The hospital had both escalators and elevators, there was almost no one taking the stairs. Ning Ning slowly walked down the stairs. She did not turn her head as if she was talking to herself, asking, "Do you want your father and Wen Yu to be able to see you?"

"Hmm..." Shi Zhong Tang tilted his head and thought about it before he laughed. "Better not."

Ning Ning stopped in her tracks, turning her head around to look at him.

"Because the price to be able to see me is too steep." Shi Zhong Tang walked down the steps one by one. "Despair, paranoia, unreconciliation and having delusions of wanting to change their own fate...I don't want them to feel any of those."

A pair of hands reached over and hugged Ning Ning. He put his head by her ear and said, "...Having you is enough for me."

There was rain this evening, fine rain was pattering the window, the air was quite cool, but maybe it was because of that that the body in his arms felt especially warm, like a bonfire on a rainy night, like the only warmth in the world.

"Mmn." Ning Ning's hand slowly climbed up his back, like a gentle dodder flower. "I will always look at you."

People differed from one another, their mindsets were different. Shi Zhong Tang had his, others had their own.

"Boom!"

Thunder cracked outside the window, a flash of white light illuminated the photo frame in the wardrobe for an instant.

Madam Qin shuddered from the thunder. She turned her head to look at the man and woman in couple's clothes in the photo frame.

"...It's done!" The man on the telescopic ladder twisted the lightbulb. "Turn on the light and test it out."

Madam Qin pressed the light switch a few times, but the light was still dark.

"This crappy lightbulb doesn't work either." The man got off the telescopic ladder, walking over and hoisting her up in a princess carry. "Forget it. In the darkness, it's better for us to go on about our business."

Madam Qin pretended to struggle a couple of times, she laughed and hammered his chest. "Seeing you like this, I knew nothing good would come of it."

On the bed, the affairs between a man and a woman were happening.

The two of them were so engrossed that neither of them noticed a figure in front of the photo frame was slowly walking over, the rabbit mask was reflected on the photo frame—a snow white rabbit head, a pair of red eyes.

"Boom—"

Another crack of thunder, Madam Qin's eyes widened, she looked over the man's shoulder.

The flash of white light in that instant illuminated the dark room.

...It also illuminated the hammer that was floating behind the man's back.

"Ah!!"

Chapter 144

144: Invisible Man

Dinner, Ning Ning had it at a coffee shop.

The person who bought dinner was Wen Yu.

He handed the menu to the waiter, the waiter bowed slightly before leaving. Wen Yu asked Ning Ning, "Am I causing a lot of trouble for you?"

Ning Ning shrugged, smiling at him with a bit of helplessness.

She had originally planned to go home already, but she had gotten a call from Director Shi halfway through, telling her not to leave as Wen Yu was about to catch up with her.

Anyone could see that Wen Yu was forced to come over by Director Shi, the purpose of this meal was equivalent to matchmaking.

"After a few days, when my father's health gets a little better, I will explain things to him clearly." Wen Yu also smiled helplessly. "So that he won't call and bother you anymore."

"Director Shi is a very good person, I will be very happy to talk to him." Before Ning Ning could finish speaking, Wen Yu's phone rang. Both of their expressions changed. They looked at each other at the same time, both thinking: Is that Director Shi calling to check on them?

Wen Yu took a look at his phone in a hurry, then breathed a sigh of relief. He stood up and told Ning Ning, "It's one of my patients. Apologies, I'll go take the call."

After leaving his seat, Wen Yu went over to a window that had no one around to answer the call.

"Doctor Wen." Madam Qin's voice rang out from the phone, her voice was trembling slightly.

Hearing that her emotions were a bit out of the ordinary, Wen Yu asked gently, "Madam Qin, is something the matter?"

While he was taking the call, the steak and salad were served. Ning Ning was holding a toothpick with her right hand, on the toothpick was half a piece of an apple. She was chewing on it slowly when she

suddenly saw Wen Yu enter in a hurry. He grabbed his coat that was draped over the back of the chair and told her, "Apologies, I have an urgent matter to attend to, I'll be off."

Ning Ning was stunned. Shi Zhong Tang walked over from behind Wen Yu, bending down and saying by her ear, "Follow him."

After frantically putting down her chopsticks, Ning Ning got up and chased after him. It might be due to the urgency of the matter, Wen Yu's pace was also urgent. Ning Ning seemed to be half jogging along the way, finally catching up to him at the carpark. She shouted while feeling out of breath, "Wait up."

Wen Yu who had opened the car door and was about to enter his car turned his head around.

"He had just answered a call from a patient," Shi Zhong Tang said behind Ning Ning, "if I'm not mistaken, the patient should be entangled with a certain masked person. We have to follow him, he won't be able to deal with a masked person alone."

Ning Ning had a cold expression on her face. She walked over and said, "Let's go together."

Wen Yu looked very vexed, "I'm about to go deal with a work matter..."

"Director Shi just gave me a call, I'm guessing he will call and check on us later." Ning Ning interrupted him. She apologised to the innocent Director Shi in her heart, then continued to spout nonsense, "Before he recovers, we cannot stimulate him. Let's continue to play a couple, alright?"

Thus, when Madam Qin looked out of her peephole, she saw that there was one extra person.

"Who is she?" Miss Qin did not open the door, asking cautiously through the door.

Wen Yu took a look at Ning Ning, he was unsure of how to answer, Ning Ning overreached and answered for him, "Hello Madam Qin, I am Doctor Wen's girlfriend, my surname is Ning."

"...Why did you bring your girlfriend along?" Madam Qin's voice sounded cold and displeased.

"When you called him, he was already off work and was having dinner with me." Ning Ning explained.

But Madam Qin seemed to be unwilling to accept her explanation,

or Madam Qin was unwilling to complicate what had happened behind the door, she did not want another person to know what had happened.

"...Then we should forget it for today," Madam Qin said, "the two of you should go back."

Ning Ning bit on her lips. Just as she was thinking about ways to persuade her, Wen Yu—who was beside her—suddenly spoke up.

"Madam Qin, she is in the same situation as you." Wen Yu glanced at Ning Ning beside him. "She also has an additional invisible person by her side."

Ning Ning was astounded by his glance, as if a reflex, she looked at Shi Zhong Tang beside her, Shi Zhong Tang was also coincidentally looking at her. The two of them had a trace of surprise in their eyes, as if asking: How did he know?

After a few moments, the door slowly opened.

The instant she clearly saw Madam Qin, Ning Ning raised her hand to cover her mouth so that she would not scream.

The woman was drenched in blood. The blood had already coagulated, it stuck to her hair, strings of them hung by her cheeks, it caused her originally fairly beautiful face to look quite sinister and frightful.

Wen Yu quickly stood in front of Ning Ning, stuffed the car keys in her hands and said, "Go back to the car and wait for me."

Ning Ning stood behind him and looked at Madam Qin who was standing across from her, feeling a little horrified in her heart. Anyone who saw a person in front of them being drenched in blood would feel horrified. It would not be as bad had the blood belonged to her, but what if...it belonged to someone else?

What exactly happened behind the door?

"Go back to the car and wait for us." Shi Zhong Tang's hand landed on Ning Ning's shoulder, forcefully giving her shoulder a squeeze, then he followed behind Wen Yu, the two of them walked through the door one after another.

Madam Qin shot a weird look at Ning Ning, then she closed the door.

Ning Ning folded her arms, walking back and forth for a while, she finally sighed and returned to the car and sat there.

After ten or so minutes of kicking her heels, Ning Ning took her phone out. She hesitated for a moment, then entered: [Masked people].

She pressed the search button, a Baidu Encyclopedia1 page showed up, there was also a song, images of men wearing masks, a movie with this name, et cetera.

She did not want any of these.

After thinking about it, Ning Ning entered a new term: [An invisible man around me].

This time, quite a number of posts showed up from all sorts of forums, Baidu Post Bar2, and even on personal blogs.

Ning Ning tapped on a post, reading every line of the content carefully, she furrowed her brows. "How could this be?"

She had thought that this was an exception, thus she opened a few other posts consecutively, but the contents were about the same. Finally, she opened a blog. The blog was written in the style of a diary: "There is an invisible person around me (12)".

"My wife is dead." Ning Ning read the diary. "She was dead beside me when I woke up early in the morning, suffocated to death by a pillow. I called the police, then sat by the bed and had a smoke. Did I do it? I had drunk a little too much last night...my vision is still blurry at the moment. I think I saw the furniture moving by itself again, a chair floated to my front, the chair cushion was dented down, it felt like there was a person sitting in front of me..."

The car door beside her was suddenly opened. Ning Ning turned her head and saw Wen Yu sitting beside her, his expression was quite gloomy.

"Who died back there?" Ning Ning asked.

Wen Yu quickly took a look at her. "Don't ask."

"The person who died was Madam Qin's boyfriend." Shi Zhong Tang told her from the backseat, "His head was cracked open with a hammer, everything spilled out. It's a good thing you didn't go in and see it."

The back of Ning Ning's head hurt just from hearing it. She remained silent for a moment before asking, "Did you call the police?"

Wen Yu did not say a word, but after a few minutes, the sound of police sirens were approaching them, the red and blue lights on top of

the cars pierced the night sky. "I'm afraid I will have to stay back to give my testimony." Wen Yu looked at the police car below the apartment, he turned around and said to Ning Ning, "You can go ahead and leave first."

Ning Ning was not in a hurry to get off the car, she asked instead, "Do you think that Madam Qin is the murderer?"

Wen Yu, "It doesn't matter what I think, the police and the forensics will provide the correct answer."

"But sometimes, the police and forensics cannot provide the correct answer either." Ning Ning stared at him. "For example, what if there really is an invisible person by Madam Qin's side?"

Wen Yu gazed at her for half an instant before he slowly turned his head back. Through the car window, he looked in the direction of the apartment, saying blandly, "She came to look for me recently with the intention of getting me to conjure up a mental illness for herself."

Ning Ning frowned. "You think that she killed someone and wanted you to fake a diagnosis of mental illness for her?"

Wen Yu, "I cannot confirm that, but it is a possibility."

Ning Ning gazed at him. She did not know how she could persuade him. Bring him to take a look at Life Theater? Or, tell him that there was a man that was invisible to him sitting in his car right now?

"...If she wanted to get away with murder by using mental illness to exonerate herself, I will not help her." A policeman walked down from the apartment across the street. He was slowly turning his head around as if he was looking for something. Wen Yu said, "But if she really is schizophrenic and is suffering from hallucinations thinking that there is an extra person in her house—who is a murderer—then I cannot ignore her."

After he finished speaking, he opened the door and got out of the car, walking over towards the policeman.

"The murderer is a masked person, the ex-husband of Madam Qin." Shi Zhong Tang said from behind Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked at Wen Yu who had just met up with the policeman in front of her. She murmured, "You don't want Wen Yu and your father to be able to see you, but other masked people don't seem to think that way..."

Shi Zhong Tang fell silent for a moment before he laughed. "That's right, they don't think that way. For the sake of their loved ones and

relatives to be able to see them, some masked people...are willing to do anything."

"Ah!!!"

Upstairs, in the bloody bedroom, Madam Qin struggled in the policeman's arms. She pointed in front of her as she shouted in anger and surprise, "Are you people blind? It's him! He's the murderer!"

A man wearing a rabbit mask was standing in front of her, the snow white rabbit mask was dyed red with blood.

The policeman looked at the direction Rabbit Mask was standing in. Then, as if he had not seen anything, he turned back and told Madam Qing angrily, "Where's the person? Stop trying to feign madness!"

"He's right there! How can you pretend to not see him?" Madam Qin started crying. A hand reached out in front of her, a bloodstained finger wiped her tears.

"Dear, I'm so happy." Rabbit Mask was so close to her, a pair of eyes full of love and madness were so close to her too, his laughter was twisted with excitement. "You can finally see me..."

"Ah!! Get away!!!"

Madam Qin's scream pierced the night and was carried out of the window.

Wen Yu and the policeman at the foot of the apartment building looked up.

"...Besides insisting that there was an invisible person in her own room, was there anything else that was strange about her?" The policeman looked back at the notepad in his hand, he continued to record the testimony.

The fingers of Wen Yu's right hand by the side of his body curled up slightly. Within the pocket of his pants, right beside hand, was what Madam Qin had handed over to him...a ticket.

1Baidu Encyclopedia is basically the Chinese equivalent of Wikipedia, .

2Baidu Post Bar is a popular Chinese forum, .

Chapter 145

145: A Chinese (Boy) Ghost Story¹

Because the person who answered Madam Qin's call was Wen Yu, the person who entered the crime scene was also Wen Yu. Ning Ning was just accompanying outside, so her testimony was done very quickly.

She went home and rested for the night. The next day, she went to the set to finish filming the rest of the show. As she was sitting down while getting her makeup taken off, a WeChat notification suddenly went off. Ning Ning picked up her phone and took a look, it was a message from Wen Yu. There was a link in it, tapping on it opened a video of an interview.

Cui Hong Mei was taking an interview.

"When all of you look at Ning Ning, you can only see the brilliance on the outside. Let me tell you, that's all but the packaging her management company gave her. What she's like in reality, only I—her grandmother—knows." In front of the camera, Cui Hong Mei held a cigarette in her hand, the right corner of her mouth was curled upwards, showing a sarcastic ridicule from her bones.

Ning Ning furrowed her brows.

Was history about to repeat itself? She thought.

Mama had also experienced something similar. While her career was on the up and up, Cui Hong Mei abruptly accepted an interview from a television station. In that interview, she lambasted her with all her might, saying that Ning Yu Ren was ungrateful and unfilial, that she was a cold and ruthless person.

The unfilial tag was then attached to Ning Yu Ren just like that, it created a huge impact on her career. It took the joint effort of her company and Director Chen to expose evidence of Cui Hong Mei's excessive gambling, borrowing money along with having sugar babies, proving that the person in the wrong was not Ning Yu Ren, that Cui Hong Mei who had thrown the words 'cold and ruthless' was the true bloodsucker.

"But no matter how bad she is, she is still stronger than her mother." Just as Ning Ning thought that she was about to meet the

same fate as her mother, Cui Hong Mei suddenly switched her tone around, she started to lambaste Ning Yu Ren, "Ning Yu Ren is the one who is inhumane."

The corner of the host's mouth twitched, he wished he could sing "Don't mention the past anymore, there are already a lot of storms in life"². He forced a laughter. "We can talk about Ning Yu Ren later, let's return to the main topic for today—Ning Ning!"

"Ning Ning?" Cui Hong Mei spat out a mouthful of smoke at the host, it suffocated the host to the point where he couldn't stop coughing. She slowly turned her head to look at the screen and said, "Come to think of it, isn't there a very popular topic recently? Invisible people."

Ning Ning was taken aback. Strange, how did that topic come up?

"Recently, on Weibo, Baidu Post Bar and WeChat Moments³, aren't there a lot of people talking about this? They say that there seems to be an invisible person around them." The smile on Cui Hong Mei's face was a little weird. "You all can ask Ning Ning about this, she had already encountered such a thing in the year o'twelve."

The year o'twelve? Did she mean 2012? That was strange. What was she talking about? Why do I not have any recollection?

"Is what she's saying true, Big Sis Ning?"

Ning Ning looked over and saw that the makeup artist was looking right at her, her eyes had a strange sparkle. "Actually, I also think that there is an extra person around me recently...I don't know if it's a misconception."

"There's no misconception," Ning Ning looked behind her, "he's right behind you."

The makeup artist looked back frantically. Behind her was an empty space, not a single soul to be seen, she was so surprised that she broke out in cold sweat.

She looked back and saw that Ning Ning was laughing as she said, "I was just joking."

The makeup breathed out a sigh of relief with some helplessness and grievances, she dragged out her voice, "Big Sis Ning..."

"My bad, my bad." Ning Ning put her hands together, her vision shifted past her shoulder. "Ah, takeout is here."

That was the snack that Ning Ning had ordered for the crew

members, there were iced drinks and desserts. Everyone came over to grab a set, people would always accept gifts graciously, so naturally, everyone greeted her with a smile.

Only one person did not smile.

"Big Sis Ning, you're leaving?" The makeup artist asked while biting a spoon and holding a slice of strawberry cake.

"Yes, I have matters to attend to, bye bye." Ning Ning nodded at her, her vision swept past the unsmiling man standing behind the makeup artist. He was wearing a dog mask, forever stuck on his face. The mask covered all his emotions, no matter if he laughed or cried, no outsider would be able to see it.

"...Big Sis Ning." The makeup artist seemed like she might have noticed where Ning Ning was looking at, or maybe she just wanted a peace of mind. She quietly got closer to Ning Ning, her eyes shifted from left to right, her vision gravitated to her back repeatedly. "Behind me...is there really no one...or anything weird?"

The dog mask looked up in response to her words, walking towards her but was stopped by Shi Zhong Tang who was pressing on his shoulder halfway.

"She's not the only one that's like this," Shi Zhong Tang told him, "most of the people are like her. Although they had already discovered that there is an extra person around them, they still wish that it was a misconception, that the other party doesn't exist."

Although his face could not be seen behind the mask, Ning Ning seemed to be able to hear tiny whimpers, like a puppy that had been abandoned.

"...Please tell her," the dog mask looked at Ning Ning, "say that I'm not around."

"...There's nothing." Ning Ning told the makeup artist, "There's nothing behind you at all."

The makeup artist let out a long sigh of relief, a relaxed smile appeared on her face. The dog mask finally saw her smiling face. He drooped his shoulders, turned around and left, his back view looked like a dog that had been chased out of the house.

Ning Ning walked out of the set behind him. Along the way, she asked Shi Zhong Tang quietly, "Where is he going?"

"Where else?" Shi Zhong Tang looked at his back from a distance and said blandly, "If the world has no place for us, masked people can

only return to one place."

Life Theater.

The phone rang abruptly, Ning Ning answered it, "Hello?"

"I just sent something to you, did you look at it?" Wen Yu's voice rang out from the phone.

Ning Ning, "I watched it."

After a small instant of silence, Wen Yu asked, "Was what your grandmother said true? Have you really met...an invisible person before?"

"...No, I haven't." Ning Ning thought for a moment, she decided to be honest with him. "In 2012, I was still a student, leading a life that was no different from the classmates around me. I ate the same thing they did, I watched the same movies they did, I had the same hairstyles they had."

To put it plainly, she just followed along blindly and did not have much of a personality.

There were people like that all over the world, having one more or one less of her wouldn't have made a difference.

"There was nothing special about me." Ning Ning concluded, "I had also never encountered anything special."

Indeed. At least in 2012, she was ordinary, had nothing special about her, never stepped into the theater, never seen a single masked person.

"Is that so..." Wen Yu pondered for a moment before he suddenly asked, "Are you free tonight?"

"What's the matter?"

"Let's watch a movie together."

"What movie? Where are we watching it?"

The entrance of Life Theater, two lanterns hung by the sides, the handwriting of the poster on the wall was mottled. Wen Yu was standing by the entrance, his phone was placed on his ear as he told Ning Ning, "Life Theater."

Eleven thirty at night, a Buick commercial vehicle was parked at the entrance of the theater. Ning Ning who could finally afford a car and stop taking taxis stepped out. She looked around her surroundings then walked up to Wen Yu.

"You're here." Wen Yu said as he took out two tickets and handed it to her.

She looked down at the Life Theater tickets in his hands. Ning Ning slowly looked up at him with a complicated expression. "Where did you get these tickets?"

"My patients gave them to me." Wen Yu answered, "One of them is from Madam Qin, the other is from a person from your line of work. It was so coincidental, both of them said that there was an invisible person around them."

Then they were both driven mad to the point where they received Life Theater tickets?

"These two people clearly don't know each other, but they both mentioned the same location." Wen Yu turned his head around and looked in the direction of the Theater, "The old theater at 35 Rouge Street."

Ning Ning looked to where he was looking. The theater was also screening a new movie tonight, the poster with mottled handwriting was pasted by the entrance. Huh? Was she seeing things? The face on the poster, why did it look so familiar...

Ning Ning could not help but walk over and stare at the poster in front of her.

Title: A Chinese (Boy) Ghost Story

Starring: Ning Qing

The content of the poster were very lively.

A group of people were doing Nuo dance⁴ on a wooden stage.

They were all wearing masks and white clothes, looking like ghosts and humans at the same time as they circled around a man and girl in the centre of the stage.

Ning Ning stared hard at the girl in the poster, "Come here."

Wen Yu walked up to her side.

"Look at this." Ning Ning pointed at the girl at the centre of the stage that was being surrounded by masked people, she asked, "Does this person look like me?"

Wen Yu looked in the direction of the poster, then used a complicated expression to look at her.

"And Ning Qing...I say, why is that name so familiar?" Ning Ning

stared at the man that was also surrounded on stage as she murmured, "Isn't that my grandfather?"

Nuo dance? Grandfather? Her teenage self?

"Ah, I remember now." It looked like a lightbulb lit up above Ning Ning's head, "It was the incident in 2012..."

"2012?" Wen Yu was quite sensitive to this number.

"Yes." Ning Ning answered, "In 2012, grandmother brought my mother and I to visit grandfather's grave in the countryside. The village was doing the nuo dance at that point of time...that type of nuo dance was a specialty of that place, only the locals knew how to do it. It was also passed down from generations to generations, they were only willing to teach it to locals. Later on, their youngsters all left the village to work in other counties, they had no one to pass the nuo dance down to, it was eventually lost in time..."

As she spoke, she fell silent.

"Let's go." Wen Yu broke the silence. "Let's go in and see what's going on."

"...I'll just go in alone." Ning Ning reached out to take the ticket out of his hand. "Come to think of it, this is my family's personal matter."

Wen Yu avoided her hand, then smiled at her as he shook his head.

"I'm the one who brought the tickets." He was stubborn for once. "Either we go in together, or I go in alone."

Letting him go alone? That put Ning Ning even less at ease.

"Alright then." After thinking about it for a moment, she said helplessly, "Let's go in together."

Wen Yu gave her one of the tickets, then he turned his body sideways and gestured with his hand, "Ladies first."

Ning Ning walked in front, he walked at the back, the two of them entered the theater together. In that moment, Ning Ning looked back. As she expected, she saw a shocked expression on his face—he looked like her in the beginning.

But even she was not shocked to this extent. He had such a dumbfounded expression, like he had watched something appear out of thin air, just like her first time transmigrating into a movie...

"Ha, the honest man was not honest, looks like the two of us seemed to have been made a fool by him." Shi Zhong Tang laughed by

Ning Ning's side, then he walked up to Wen Yu.

The two brothers were within striking distance of each other, Shi Zhong Tang leaned forward with his face that had a jade mask on, asking as he looked Wen Yu in the eyes, "Little brother, can you really see me?"

1The direct translation of the title is "The ghost of a beautiful boy"(倩男幽魂), but it is a direct reference to the movie ""(倩女幽魂) which actually directly translates to "The ghost of a beautiful girl", the author changed the word girl to boy, that's the reason for the awkward translation.

2This is actually lyrics from a song name .

3Moments is a function of the smartphone app WeChat, launched on 19 April 2012 in the WeChat version 4.0. It serves new social-networking functions for Wechat users. The Chinese translation of Moment is known as "Friends' circle", which means users can share and get access to accepted WeChat friends' information, creating an intimate and private communicating circle within the users' choice of close friends.

4Nuo dancing, one of the most ancient arts and a necessary element in Nuo opera, has existed in Nanfeng, Jiangxi for over 2000 years. The movements of Nanfeng Nuo dancing are simple but powerful, retaining their ancient characters. Nanfeng Nuo dancing was even regarded as "The Active fossil of Chinese dancing Art".

Chapter 146

146: People of Different Surnames

Wen Yu could not see him.

Shi Zhong Tang seemingly smashed his own face at the other. His speed was quick, his momentum was forceful, anybody would have reacted to it. However, Wen Yu didn't even blink, he did not step back in surprise either. He stood his ground with his regular expression, smiling at Ning Ning. "I've made a fool out of myself, I did not think there would still be an old theater like this."

Ning Ning looked at him for half an instant before she said with a smile, "What about the people? What do you think?"

"People?" Wen Yu was stunned, he looked at his surroundings. "...Where?"

The people had always been around, by his side.

Besides Shi Zhong Tang, there were also other masked people. Although there were less than usual, but seeing them enter, all of the masked people came over from different corners, laughing in a strange manner. One by one they said to them, "Welcome back."

"Welcome back."

"Hehe, welcome back."

Who were they welcoming?

Shi Zhong Tang, or Wen Yu who was once a masked person? Or maybe...her who was a regular customer?

"Over there." Ning Ning pointed at a masked person. "Not only is the theater old, the staff members here are also very old, what do you think?"

Wen Yu looked at where she was pointing and said with a laugh, "They are young at heart. Some old folks can't stand not doing anything, the more you want them to retire and stay home, the more their health would decline. On the contrary, holding a job would maintain their mental and physical health."

The masked person that Ning Ning was pointing at was at a tender age, he looked around seven or eight. The reason she had said that he

was old was because he was wearing a jade pendant around his neck, a scarlet ancient robe and a pair of deer skin shoes—he looked like a young master from a rich family in a Ming or Qing dynasty novel. Saying that he was old was just saying that he had a lot of seniority being a masked person.

"Ok," Ning Ning interrupted him, "you can't see anything, right?"

Wen Yu stopped speaking and looked at her quietly.

"No wonder you hesitated so long when I asked you if the person on the poster looked like me." Ning Ning could not help but let out a laughter, she shook her head, "You can't even see the poster, right?"

Wen Yu did not refute her. At this time, silence meant admission.

"You had the cheek to say ladies first." Ning Ning stared at him. "You just heard someone else talk about Life Theater, but you cannot see it at all, that's why you need a person to bring you in, right?"

Wen Yu sighed after she stared at him for a long while. "Yes."

"I knew it." Shi Zhong Tang walked a few rounds around him, laughing with his hands clasped behind his back. "He does not fit the standards of the theater at all—no, he is the complete opposite of the standards. Full of hope and forgiveness, instead of changing the past, he would want to change the future more... Even if the whole world were to be able to come in, he probably wouldn't be able to."

Wen Yu seemed to not want to be tangled up with this problem anymore. He sat on a random chair, a group of masked people immediately surrounded him. One of them bent down, narrowed their eyes and looked at the ticket in his hand. They looked up and said, "Customer, the ticket you have is an ordinary ticket, you cannot sit on a designated seat."

Ning Ning hurried over and pulled him out, they walked over to the ordinary section.

"What's the matter?" Wen Yu asked.

"That was a special seat," Ning Ning said, "you are holding an ordinary ticket, you cannot sit there."

Wen Yu looked at the ticket in his hand, as if absorbed in thoughts. "Are there many types of tickets?"

Ning Ning shut her mouth, she chose not to answer his question so that she would not leak more information to him.

The two of them sat down among the ordinary seats. Once they

were seated, Wen Yu looked at the screen in front and blandly said, "Madam Qin wasn't the first one."

Ning Ning looked over at him.

"Starting from two months ago, the amount of people that came to the clinic for consultation had been increasing." Wen Yu said, "It wouldn't matter if it was one or two more, but it wasn't ordinary when it increased by the tens and hundreds. It's not an infectious disease, why did everyone have the same symptoms? ...Everyone said that there was an invisible person around them."

This time it was Ning Ning's turn to remain silent.

"I have to know what is happening so that I can help them." Wen Yu grasped the armrests tightly. A ray of white light fell upon his eyes, it was from the screen in front of him...the movie for the night has started. He paused for a moment, he finally added one more sentence, "Also, my brother, You Ling and your mother had mentioned Life Theater tickets, I want to know..."

What do you want to know?

Before Ning Ning could make out what he was saying, the theme song started playing.

It was the voice of a sickly man accompanied by the deep sounds of a drum and crisp sounds of a flute, he sang in a very weird tune, "Wearing masks on the face, wearing colourful clothes, doing ritualistic dance, expelling evil and pestilence... Ha, who's evil, who's pestilent? Who's the Nuo dance for? Like a play but not a play, is a play that is not a play."

A weightless feeling came over her, Ning Ning slowly closed her eyes.

2012, on a narrow road to a village.

"Ning Ning..."

"Ning Ning."

"Ning Ning!"

Ning Ning suddenly sat up. She bumped into the person that was calling out for her, the two of them cried out at the same time.

"You loathsome girl, why are you so fidgety? Ah." Cui Hong Mei rubbed her forehead. "That hurt!"

Ning Ning also rubbed her forehead, she took the time to look at

her surroundings. She realised that she was sitting in a car, it was drizzling outside. Ning Yu Ren got out of the car to take a look, shaking her head. "It's not going to work, the tire has sunk in."

The ground of a mountain was not easy to walk on. Moreover, it had just rained, the mud was like the hands of a resentful wife, holding on to the wheel tightly and not letting go. Cui Hong Mei got off the car and took a look, she turned anxious. "Ah, what do we do now? It's getting dark, don't tell me we have to spend the night in the car?"

"I told you we should have taken the train here. You wouldn't listen, you insisted on me to drive here so you can be ostentatious." Ning Yu Ren said coldly.

"We're finally rich. If we don't show it off, what else can we use the money for?" Cui Hong Mei retorted.

The two of them argued until an unfamiliar voice rang out from the side, "The village is not far away from here, can't you just walk the rest of the way? You can get the people in the village to help you push the car later."

That made a lot of sense!

Ning Ning looked at the back of the other person. The person was wearing an old Chinese tunic suit and a pair of cloth shoes, he was fleet-footed even among the mountains and plains, one could tell that he was used to this path with one look.

Ning Ning chased after him frantically.

"Ning Ning, don't run off on your own!" Ning Yu Ren's voice rang out behind her.

"Mama, the village is right in front." Ning Ning shouted back at her, "Let's rush over while it's still bright out, then we can get people to help us."

The three girls went up the slope, wading through muds with great difficulty as they got to the entrance of the village before it turned dark. Cui Hong Mei wiped the sweat off her forehead. "Thank God."

"We should thank that big brother." Ning Ning looked at an unfamiliar teenager not far from her.

"What are you talking about?" Cui Hong Mei looked at where she was pointing and asked doubtfully, "What big brother?"

Ning Ning was astonished. At this time, the young man walking in

front of them who had led them here turned his head around, on his face was a ferocious and terrifying mask that had fangs on all sides.

...A masked person?

"Eh, you guys are?" A villager walked towards Ning Ning's group. He walked past the masked person along the way, but he paid no heed to him, as if he couldn't see that person at all. "Outsiders? Here for a trip?"

"Who would come to this crappy place for a trip?" Cui Hong Mei fanned her face with her hand. "We're locals, I'm Cui Hong Mei."

The villager pointed at her face, he got so excited that he could not speak for a very long time. He turned his head back after some time and shouted, "The Ning family has returned! Ning Qing's wife and child have returned!"

"The Ning family has returned?"

"Ah, that's great."

"Where? Where?"

A group of people flocked over quickly. Ning Ning had thought that they were rushing over to her superstar Mama, but they were rushing over at her in the end.

"You're Ning Qing's granddaughter?"

"What is your name?"

"It's too bad, if only you were a boy..."

"It's alright, a girl is the same as well, she has the Ning surname anyway."

These people...why did they feel a little strange?

Ning Ning looked at the passionate villagers in front of her. She had experienced the same thing when she was a teenage girl. But at that time, she had seen little of the world, she had credited the passion of the villagers to her superstar Mama... Wasn't there that saying? The quickest way to gain favour from a mother was to praise her child.

As long as she was by Ning Yu Ren's side, all eyes would be on her, she would always get praised, Ning Ning had long gotten used to it. Looking back at it now, she just realised that that was not it. Although the villagers were interested in Mama, they were more interested in her, and the reason for their interest was...

It seemed to be just because of her surname being Ning?

"Alright, don't crowd around here." A little old man poking with a crutch who looked like a village chief appeared, smiling at Ning Ning's group amiably. "Let's go, let's go. The banquet is about to begin. Everyone, take a seat at the table, we can talk about anything while we eat."

Ning Ning had another surprise when they took their seats.

"Come," the village chief pulled out a chair, "sit here."

Ning Ning looked at him, then at Ning Yu Ren. She did not dare to sit down, she forced a smile and said, "I'm a junior, how can I sit at the head of the table?"

Everyone said that the people from the city were prideful. Actually, the people in the country were more prideful, furthermore, they also had more rules. Especially in villages that were sealed off from the outside world for many years, their rules could come close to the ones from ancient times. Wake up in the morning to work, go home and sleep at night, no women at the dining table, the dead must be buried, they even spoke with old Chinese phonology.

If one were to offend ancient people who valued those rules, they would sometimes land themselves in serious trouble.

"It's fine, it's fine." The old village chief remained amiable, he even pressed Ning Ning onto the chair. "It's a special circumstance this time. Your surname is Ning, you are supposed to sit here."

Ning Ning slipped away from him like a loach. She slipped back to Ning Yu Ren's side and hugged Mama's arm, saying to him while still in shock, "No, no, no, I'll just sit here."

"Just let her sit here." Ning Yu Ren hugged Ning Ning and smiled at the village chief. "Her surname is Ning. In this village, she can do whatever she wants, isn't that so?"

The old village chief looked at her with a strange look. Ning Ning noticed it. The reception area that was rowdy just a moment ago turned silent, everyone stopped moving their chopsticks and looked at them from every direction while holding their wine cups.

Amidst the suffocating silence, the old village chief suddenly let out a laughter. "Of course...Come, come! Serve the wine ,serve the wine!"

The banquet that seemed to have had the mute button pressed on had started to move again. The group of people joked and laughed, ate and drank, there were even people who came over to have a toast with Ning Ning's group from time to time.

"She's still young, she can't drink, let her have some other beverage." Ning Yu Ren poured juice into Ning Ning's wine cup.

Ning Ning thought for a moment before she told Ning Yu Ren, "Mama, I am a junior, I cannot let these aunties and uncles come to me, I should go to them."

"Alright," Ning Yu Ren said with a smile, "go ahead...remember not to take any alcohol."

"Yes, yes, yes!" Ning Ning hopped off the chair. She held the juice in her hand and went over. As she was toasting them, she asked for their names and their seniority.

She discovered something very strange.

Generally speaking, a village would usually have only one surname. For example, in a Zhang Village, more than half of the people would have the Zhang surname. More than half the people of the Niu Village would have the surname Niu. Even when not everyone had the same surname, at least half of them would have the same surname. This surname would be the main surname of the village.

But in this Ning Village, there was only one family with the surname Ning—Ning Ning's grandfather's family.

As for the others—Zhao, Qian, Sun, Li, Zhou, Wu, Zheng, Wang... In the entire village, there were scarcely anyone with the same surname.

This was a village of different surnames.

"If blood ties and surname are not what is holding the village together," Ning Ning could not help but think, "then what is?"

Chapter 147

147: The Position of the Ning Family

The mosquitos in the countryside were too powerful, one bite would cause a giant bump. Ning Ning woke up in the middle of the night due to her getting bitten by the mosquitos. She could not fall asleep again because of the loud snores from Cui Hong Mei, her eyes remained open till sunrise.

She got off the bed quietly, opened the door gently and went out. She looked at the Ning Village outside the door.

At a glance, it was a small and dainty old town.

The black tiles and white walls of Hui style buildings¹, the closely connected houses, with their overhanging eaves. Although the place was small, it had everything. Walking along the narrow and slender streets would bring you past one palace graduate memorial arch and two chastity archways² before it finally ended at the ancestral hall.

The palace graduate memorial arch and the chastity archways had been eroded by the wind and rain, only the ancestral hall in front of her was decorated with lanterns and festoons. It was in full swing as a group of people were bustling in front of the door, a wooden stage was built up from the ground with their hands, the old village chief was directing them. Suddenly, someone pointed in Ning Ning's direction. He turned back and smiled. "Ah, daughter of the Ning family, why have you come?"

"...I came out to buy breakfast." Ning Ning came up with a random excuse, then looked at the stage in front of her and asked, "What's this for?"

"We're setting up a stage for a performance." The old village chief said while grinning from ear to ear, his smile made Ning Ning uncomfortable.

"When will the stage be ready?" Ning Ning feigned interest, "Whom did you invite to perform?"

"How can we invite an outsider to perform in a performance meant for our ancestors?" The old village chief shook his head. "A Nuo dance performance, we will perform and sing it ourselves."

He looked up at Ning Ning with a weird smile all of a sudden. "You

are one of us, you have to perform as well."

Ning Ning was taken aback.

"...Ning Ning!" Ning Yu Ren's voice suddenly rang out behind her. She looked back and saw Mama walking quickly towards her, her forehead was slightly perspiring, it seemed that she had run all the way here.

Ning Yu Ren pulled Ning Ning behind her, she was like a mother hen protecting her chick, she cautiously and carefully said to the old village chief, "My surname is Ning too, I will perform this time."

The old village chief shook his head. "A daughter that is married off, a water that is poured out..."

"I only gave birth to a daughter, I didn't marry anyone." Ning Yu Ren interrupted him rather stubbornly.

Ning Ning looked at the old village chief, then at Mama.

It was a scene she had never seen before.

Although she had also followed them to the country last time, she kept her bad habit she got from the city, lazing in bed even at eight or nine in the morning. After she got up, Mama would have already been done with making breakfast. While they had breakfast, Mama casually said, "I want to perform the Nuo dance in the ancestor worship ceremony in a month's time."

Ning Ning had wanted to stay together with Mama for a month, but she was a spoiled kid, she could not stand the mosquitos from the country, neither could she stand the boring life of a little village, so she made fuss about wanting to go home. Ning Yu did not seem to want her to stay long as well, she very quickly got someone to drive over and took her away from the village.

What happened afterwards, Ning Ning did not know.

Indeed, the person who had come to fetch her seemed to be...

"What do you say?" The old village chief interrupted Ning Ning's thoughts, he stared into Ning Ning's eyes and asked, "Do you want your mama to take your place?"

Ning Ning's thoughts stirred.

The phrase "take someone's place" made people feel a little uneasy.

Ning Yu Ren subtly tugged her clothes from the back, but Ning Ning pretended not to notice. She said to the old village chief in a

naive and innocent manner, "But I've never danced the Nuo dance before, in just a month...will it work?"

"The others wouldn't be able to make it work, but you would be able to!" Seeing that she was open to the suggestion, the old village chief was overjoyed at the unexpected good news. "Why, the Ning family's role in the Nuo dance has always been..."

"Stop." Ning Yu Ren suddenly shouted. Seeing that everyone put down what they were doing and looked at her, she smiled awkwardly as she grabbed Ning Ning's arm and said, "The two of us will talk about this, we'll give you a definite answer later."

Once she finished speaking, she pulled Ning Ning and walked back hurriedly, the villagers they met along the way greeted her passionately.

"Ah, daughter of the Ning family, you're out so early, have you eaten?"

"Daughter of the Ning family, come eat at my place if you have not eaten, I've just made crock pot soup."

"Come over to my place, daughter of the Ning family, I'll serve you noodles with free range eggs, you can have as much as you want."

Daughter of the Ning family, daughter of the Ning family, Mama was a daughter of the Ning family, she was also a daughter of the Ning family, so who were they calling out to?

Because she had been living under her mother's radiance, so the Ning Ning from the past thought that the passion from the villagers were directed at Ning Yu Ren.

But now, she realised that they had all been looking past Ning Yu Ren and focusing on her.

"Bang!"

The wooden door was shut tightly, it locked all of the villagers' gazes outside.

The white mosquito net rustled, Cui Hong Mei who was on the bed turned around and continued to snore.

"...Mama," Ning Ning caught her breath and asked, "what exactly did the Ning family do?"

"Don't ask." Ning Yu Ren said stiffly.

"If you don't tell me, I'll ask someone else later." Ning Ning said,

"For example, the village chief, he would definitely be willing to tell me."

"...It's best that you don't listen to him." Ning Yu Ren furrowed her brows. Seeing that Ning Ning looked at her stubbornly, she sighed helplessly. She pulled Ning Ning to the table and sat her down. Ning Yu Ren poured two cups of tea from the teapot, picked one up and took a sip, then said blandly, "Nuo dance, without the mask you are a mortal, with a mask you are a god. It's a sacrificial dance, it differs from one place to another. In this village, it has been around for a very long time, you can trace it back to the Song Ming era..."

She took another sip from the cup and continued speaking, "Ning Family's position in this Nuo dance is to be the god."

"What do you mean by god? It's clearly a ghost."

Both Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren looked towards the voice, they saw that grandmother on the bed was already awake. She was lying on her side in the net, yawning as she told them, "Damn it, can't you two talk outside? I can't sleep with all the noise."

Ning Yu Ren and Ning Ning looked at each other. She asked, "Mom, why do you say that it's a ghost?"

"I'm not the one who said it, your father said so." Cui Hong Mei continued to yawn. "He would always say that he cannot do this Nuo dance anymore, the one who performs is a ghost, the ones who watch are ghosts too—Damn it, how could he say such a thing? Good thing it's in this village, good thing he is surnamed Ning..."

Cui Hong Mei liked to talk bad about others from time to time, especially the bad things related to her relatives. But when all was said and done, she was born from this village, she grew up in this village, if one were to remove the grievances from her words, it would gradually restore the truth of the village's Nuo dance...

Once upon a time, everyone in the Ning Village knew how to do the Nuo dance.

Moreover, based on the different surnames, the roles everyone performed were also different. The Ning family people have only performed as a singular role up till now—the god.

But after the Republic of China was founded, people turned jittery, there were even outsiders who reported the Ning Village for practicing witchcraft. For the sake of self-preservation, the village stopped their annual Nuo dance ancestor worship ceremony. They stopped performing out in the open, but they still privately passed down the

Nuo dance as a craft that was inherited through time. It was passed down, generations through generations, to their children and grandchildren.

It was not until the country's reform and opening³ that the Nuo dance succeeded in its application as world cultural heritage. That was the moment when the village recovered their tradition from the past, they would hold the Nuo dance ancestor worship ceremony once every few years.

"But a tradition that was tossed aside is hard to pick up again," Cui Hong Mei said, "especially these few years, the amount of people who left and went to the city to work is too many. Many youngsters are not willing to learn the Nuo dance from their parents."

As she got to this part, she glanced at Ning Yu Ren.

Ning Ning blinked her eyes. "Grandmother, you must be very good at the Nuo dance then."

"Of course!" Cui Hong Mei's eyes wandered around a little, looking a little guilty. "...I was very good at it when I was young, otherwise, your grandfather would not have taken a fancy to me. I'm old now, I can't do it anymore."

"Mama knows how to do it too?" Ning Ning turned her head and looked at Ning Yu Ren.

Ning Yu Ren hesitated for a moment. "I know a little bit. Your grandfather taught me, but he had yet to finish teaching me before passing away from illness."

"I don't know any of it," Ning Ning looked at them, "why does the village chief insist that I do it?"

Ning Yu Ren and Cui Hong Mei looked at each other, they were baffled as well. After all, Ning Ning's grandfather had passed away too early, there were a lot of important things that had not been clearly accounted for.

Cui Hong Mei rolled her eyes before suddenly laughing. "I know why...?"

"You have already given birth to a child, even if you are not married, you are water that has been half poured out.⁴" She told Ning Yu Ren, then her vision shifted to Ning Ning. "You're different. Not only do you have the Ning surname, you have yet to marry anyone., I think those miserable old fools want to introduce their grandsons, nephews and sons to you."

The corner of Ning Ning's mouth twitched. "It can't be that melodramatic, right?"

"You're still young, you didn't grow up in this village, you wouldn't understand." Cui Hong Mei became more and more awake as she spoke, she sat up and gesticulated. "These old farts see that which you don't see value in at all as something akin to royal treasure. Just wait and see, I know them too well, they will definitely introduce prospects to you. If they succeed, the Ning family's mask would successfully become their family's possession."

"Mask?" Ning Ning was astonished, she didn't know how this matter went one whole round and ended up being related to masks.

"What did you think? Nuo dances are all done with masks, every family has a different mask in the village." As she said that, Cui Hong Mei looked at her surroundings, "Speaking of which, where is our family's mask?"

The three of them started to rummage through the house but they could not find it on the first floor. They pondered going up the second floor. The wooden house that had been beaten up by natural elements over centuries had become old and decadent like a human would. Stepping on the wooden steps was like stepping on mud—you would sink in. Ning Ning stepped on it twice and got off twice, she really did not have the guts to walk up such a flight of stairs.

Thump, thump, thump. A few knocks rang out behind the door.

After they opened the door, they saw the old village chief standing outside with a walking cane. He scanned them and grinned. "Doing spring cleaning?"

The three of them said yes at the same time. At that time, they actually looked like mothers and daughters.

After he nagged at them for a while, the old village chief returned to the main topic and said to them, "Come to my place for dinner tonight, I've prepared a banquet."

"We wouldn't want to impose on you." Ning Yu Ren rejected him politely. "We just had a banquet at your place yesterday, you don't have to be overly courteous on account of us."

"I'm not being courteous to you," the old village chief said with a grin, "the banquet yesterday was a welcome party for all of you, the banquet today..."

He slowly turned his head and stared at Ning Ning. "Is especially

prepared for you."

After he left, the three of them exchanged looks. The corner of Cui Hong Mei's lips curled up as she smiled smugly. "I told you so, the old fart wants to introduce a prospect to you."

Ning Ning did not take her words seriously, but while she was on the way to the village chief's house that night, she started to have an air of uncertainty about her.

There were no streetlights in the village, the only thing that lit up the way to the village chief's house were cars' headlights.

"...Why are there so many cars?" Ning Ning murmured.

The roads in the village were very narrow, it was so narrow that there was no way two cars would be able travel side by side at the same time. A long queue of cars which looked like a snake with no end extended out from her to a place that she could not see.

Car doors opened repeatedly. One or two people, maybe two or three unfamiliar unfamiliar faces walked out. They were all smartly dressed, they looked like successful people or the offsprings of successful people.

"Tsk, what's there to freak out about?" Cui Hong Mei pouted. "To return home in glory is not exclusive to me, everyone is the same here."

Ning Ning had thought that her statement, "everyone is the same", was an exaggeration, but after she entered the village chief's house, she discovered to her surprise that it was actually true...

The amount of people gathered at the village chief's house was too many. Some of them could enter the house, others could only sit in the courtyard. Lanterns with long tassels were hung on the tree branches, both lanterns and tassels gently swayed in the evening wind, swaying lights were shining on the big round table in the courtyard, on the abundant fish and meat on the table, and on the faces by the table.

There were super rookies in the financial world, the leading authorities of the literary world, even the worst of them was the world's biggest lottery winner. These people would usually only appear in the newspaper, they would usually not keep in contact with the village, why did they all come together today?

Surely it couldn't be as Cui Hong Mei had said...they were all people who just wanted to return home in glory?

"Ah, you're here." The village chief's son welcomed her as he came out of the house. "Father and all the uncles have been waiting for you for a long time, quickly go in."

In that moment, Ning Ning felt everyone's gazes focused on her.

Whispers started to kick up around her.

"Who is she?"

"Must be a Ning family member."

"Why are we sitting outside, but a junior like her is allowed to sit inside?"

"Shhh, you dare call her something like a junior? She is..."

The amount of people talking increased, their voices got lower and lower, they buzzed as if they were a box of bees.

Ning Ning did not want to be the center of their discussion, she did not want to go in to drink and sing with the uncles either, but she could not reject them. At this time, Ning Yu Ren gave her back a pat, smiling. "Go in and give a toast to all the uncles, come out when you're done."

Those words gave Ning Ning a way out, she breathed a sigh of relief and nodded. "Ok."

She walked towards the main house alone. The village chief's son only escorted her for a moment then stopped a meter away from the door. He acted respectfully as if he could not continue the rest of the way, only Ning Ning and certain people could walk down the path.

Ning Ning took a look at him before continuing to walk alone. She slowly pushed the carved wooden door in front of her.

Light poured out from within and shone on her face.

In front of her was a long table, at the head of the table was the old village chief.

As the ray of light pouring onto Ning Ning's face became thicker and thicker, as the door slowly opened wider and wider on both sides, she saw that the long table had ten to twenty people sitting on each side.

When the door was fully opened, that group of people turned over consecutively to look at her.

Every one of them had a mask on their face.

The candlelights flickered on their masks, making them look like neither humans, demons nor ghosts, smiling at her from within the shadows of the candles, sparing no effort to be demonlike.

After half an instant, a quiet laughter resounded. The mask on the old village chief's face was lifted up, he smiled at Ning Ning. "What's the matter? Didn't the adults at home tell you the rules of the village? A banquet in which everyone takes part like this, every representative of their surnames has to attend with their masks on."

Ning Ning said honestly, "We have not found our mask yet."

An uproar immediately erupted around the table. The old village chief stamped the floor with his cane, clang, clang, clang, signalling the crowd to quiet down. then he told Ning Ning earnestly, "Quickly look for it later. Look for me if you can't find it, I will get the villagers to look for it with you... Alright, take a seat for now."

Ning Ning sat on his left obediently. The moment her butt touched the seat, she started to think of an excuse to leave. The village chief stamped his cane again, calling for everyone's attention upon himself, then he looked at the people around the table before he sighed. "We're just missing one person."

His words caused a wave of sighs.

"That's right, even the Ning family has returned."

"It's rare that we get this kind of attendance."

"There might never be such a chance again."

"Such a pity, such a pity, we're only missing one, if not we would be able to give a complete performance."

Ning Ning was simply too curious, thus she asked the person beside her quietly, "Who are you guys talking about?"

It was a person wearing a mask with antlers attached to it, he looked like a beast from afar, he looked...not much like a human up close. He took a deep look at Ning Ning before he explained quietly, "In our village, every surname acts as a role—god, human, ghost. They are all here, we're missing only the last one—the one who slays the ghost!"

Just as his voice trailed off, the door suddenly opened with a creak.

"Who is it?" The village chief was about to fly into a rage. "Who let you barge in..."

His voice stopped. Along with everyone else, he stared at the

person's face with their eyes wide open.

"Apologies." A tall man stood in the doorway, the shadow behind him was extremely long. He slowly took off the snow white mask on his face, his voice was deep but husky, "I'm late."

A familiar voice...

Ning Ning looked at the weary face underneath the mask.

...How could it be him?

1Huizhou architecture is one of the traditional Chinese architecture styles, which prevailed mostly in the historical Huizhou prefecture of Anhui, China as a critical element of Huizhou culture. The architecture uses bricks, woods and stone as raw materials, timber frames as significant structures. The bearing structure is a wooden beam, and parapet walls are made of bricks, rocks, and soils.

2Literally archways to commemorate the chastity of a woman.

3The Chinese economic reform is the program of economic reforms termed "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" and "socialist market economy" in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

4In Chinese culture, when a woman gets married, she is no longer part of her original family, she is instead considered to be part of her husbands family.

Chapter 148

148: Rules

Ning Ning recognised his face, the others didn't.

But they recognised the mask in his hand.

"How are you related to Li Shui Sheng?" The old village chief stared at the mask in his hand and asked.

"He's my father," the man in the doorway answered, "my name is Li Xuan."

...Li Xuan? He doesn't exist. Your name is clearly Pei Xuan!

Pei Xuan looked older than he used to. There were some white spots on his temple, his face looked worn out. He closed the door behind him, walked up to the old village chief's side and handed the mask in his hand to the other.

The old village chief took the mask, flipped it over and looked at it for a long time. He finally nodded at everyone that was seated, he had acknowledged his identity, then he returned the mask to him and smiled, "Sit, sit."

No! Village Chief, you cannot recognise people by their mask, look at his identification!

Pei Xuan cast his gaze around the long table. There was only a space left, to the right of the village chief.

He sat down on the seat and looked up, he was face to face with Ning Ning.

Under the candle lights, he looked at Ning Ning with a strange expression.

"She's from the Ning family." The village chief looked at Ning Ning before he turned and looked at Pei Xuan, sighing. "The Li family is here. It's rare for everyone to be here, let's discuss the matter of this year's ancestor worship ceremony."

"The one from the Li family," one of them said, "how is your Nuo dance?"

Pei Xuan blandly glanced at him. "I don't know how to do it."

"You don't know?" The other party immediately raised his voice, telling the people around him, "Did you hear that? He doesn't know how, how is he going to perform if he doesn't know how?"

"He can learn if he doesn't know." Someone was not buying it. He said glibly, "Li Shui Sheng did not show up in the past, so you stood in for him. Now that his son has come back, this is none of your concern anymore."

"You think I'm doing this for personal gain? You're wrong, I'm doing this for everyone!" The other party said in an exasperated manner, "Didn't you hear him? He doesn't know how! If you let him perform, he will ruin the ancestor worship ceremony!"

The two of them argued excitedly. In the end, a cane stomped the floor, the two of them looked towards the village chief at the same time.

"Stop arguing." He slowly turned his head to look at Pei Xuan. "Li Xuan, you really don't know how to dance at all?"

Pei Xuan shook his head.

"Then we'll do this." The village chief pondered for a moment before he cast his eyes towards the stand-in. Amidst the excited look of the other party the village chief slowly said, "Ah Tie, you'll teach him."

The smile on the other party's face stiffened.

"I know that you're thinking for everyone's sake, but the rules cannot be changed." The village chief emphasised on the word *rule*, his expressionless face looked like a statue standing guard in front of a tomb, eternally unchanging regardless of natural elements. "You should know the fate of those who change the rules right?"

At that moment. Ah Tie seemed to have remembered something, his face turned pale. He looked down and said, "Yes, I will teach him."

The village chief then nodded with satisfaction, he reverted to his usual benignant look.

A weak voice suddenly rang out by his side, "...What about me?"

Everyone looked towards the voice, their vision gathered on Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked to the left and right at them and said, "I don't know how to do it either."

What was strange was that no one offered to stand in for her, the

village chief even consoled her amiably, "It's fine, it's fine. All your role requires from you is to sit through the entire process and watch, singing and dancing are matters of the others."

Ning Ning took a look at him. Just sit and watch? If it was that easy, why did she have to be the one to do it? Was it really because of her Ning surname? Or maybe it was because of the rules of the village?

What they talked about afterwards basically had nothing to do with her: when would the stage be ready, would they invite outsiders to watch, the mask of one family was broken by their child, what should they do if they couldn't fix it before the ancestor worship ceremony starts, etc. It was extremely dull for Ning Ning. Just as she had finally endured to the end of the meeting, hot food and wine were served.

The person serving them was actually Ning Yu Ren.

"Mama," Ning Ning frantically stood up, "let me help you."

"How would that do?" The village chief pulled her hand. "You are of the Ning family, not a servant."

"My mom is also of the Ning family." Ning Ning looked at him doubtfully.

The village chief actually started smiling. The others started smiling along with him. Those smiles seemed to have a profound meaning, it sent chills down a person's spine.

The only one who didn't smile was Pei Xuan, he looked at Ning Yu Ren as if he was thinking of something.

Ning Ning broke free of the village chief's hand and went over to Ning Yu Ren's side. She helped her portion out the food and wine, then poured a cup of wine for herself. She raised the cup and said, "Let me give a toast to all Uncles, Grandpas and Aunties."

She drank it in one gulp. None of them dared to disrespect her. She didn't know if it was because of her surname or if it was because of the rules of the village, everyone raised their wine cups.

"*Cough, cough.*" Ning Ning put down the wine cup and coughed twice.

She was a person who could drink, but that was after she had entered society, her current self was in her teenage body. Because of how Ning Yu Ren had doted on her, she had never touched a drop of alcohol, so she could not really adapt to it.

But this was good. Ning Ning leaned on Ning Yu Ren, saying meekly, "Mama, I'm a little dizzy..."

"I told you not to drink." Ning Yu Ren complained, then she told the rest, "Excuse us, she is drunk, I'll bring her back."

Seeing that Ning Ning was so drunk that she was about to lie on the floor, the village chief frantically got up and said, "Don't worry, don't worry. I will get someone to pack up some hot food, you can bring it back, then I will get someone to drive you home."

Just as he finished speaking, Pei Xuan picked up his car key on the table, got up and said, "I'll do it."

Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren both froze.

"That's for the best, that's for the best." The village chief, on the other hand, was very happy. He patted Pei Xuan's back repeatedly. "That's more like it. Li family is supposed to be close to Ning family."

...Was this another rule of the village?

Outside of the village chief's house, Pei Xuan opened the door to his car without saying a word. Cui Hong Mei stepped into the car first, as she didn't succeed in flaunting her wealth, she was in a rage. "God knows how these people make their money, every one of them are stinking rich. It's not normal, it's not normal at all. Their source of money must be wrong..."

Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren held each other up as they entered the car without saying a word.

Along the way, besides Cui Hong Mei, no one else had spoken a word, the car sent them all the way back home.

Once she had gotten out of the car and started to walk home, Ning Ning could not help but take a look behind.

The clouds were scattered and the moon was bright. Within the pale white moonlight, Ning Ning saw that Pei Xuan had not left, he was looking at her while sitting in the car.

...It was yet another indescribable and strange look.

That night, none of the three women could sleep well.

Cui Hong Mei chanted in her dreams, "Returning home in glory, returning home in glory...I won't let you all look down on me."

Ning Ning, on the other hand, quietly got off the bed. She walked up to the door, placed herself up on it and eavesdropped on the

movements outside.

Ning Yu Ren was only wearing an unlined garment as she stood outside, the night was cold, her voice trembled as she held her phone and asked, "What are you up to again?"

"What Li Xuan! You are clearly Pei Xuan!"

"...Are you targeting Ning Ning?"

Ning Yu Ren seemed to be determined on the fact that Pei Xuan had appeared because he had some sort of scheme, but Pei Xuan flatly denied it. The two of them argued with no results, Ning Yu Ren was so angry that she hung up on him.

Ning Ning frantically walked away from the door. She raced back under the blanket, closed her eyes and started to pretend to sleep.

After a moment, there was some rustling noise beside her, Ning Yu Ren laid down on her side.

"...Ning Ning," Ning Yu Ren's voice quietly rang out by her ear, "I'll get someone to send you home."

Ning Ning opened her eyes. She turned her head to look at Ning Yu Ren.

"What about you?" Ning Ning asked, "You're not going home?"

Ning Yu Ren held up her head with one hand, smiling as she lay beside Ning Ning, "Mama still has matters to attend to, I cannot go home for now."

"You want your mother to stand in for you?" The village chief's words suddenly flashed across her ears, she looked at Ning Yu Ren and asked, "Do you want to stand in for me?"

Ning Yu Ren was surprised. She gently caressed Ning Ning's cheek. "Two people of the Ning family, we can't both leave, one of us has to stay."

"Then I'm not leaving either." Ning Ning said, she thought: I regret leaving last time.

You might be smiling in front of me, but you are sad in places I cannot see.

In the summer of 2012, you suddenly strayed away from your normal behaviour. You became strict with me, you personally taught me how to cook, you said that if I knew how to cook, I would be able to survive anywhere. I laughed at the idea, I said that takeout existed

in the world.

In the summer of 2012, you suddenly strayed away from your normal behaviour. You urged me not to be an actress, that the glamour of the stage was not necessarily better than being a normal person. I didn't listen. At that time, I was full of youthful vigour, I could only see the glamour of the stage, I could not see and looked down on normalcy.

In the summer of 2012, you paid off another debt for grandmother. I argued with you, I said that the reason grandmother had ended up like this was due to you spoiling her. You became dejected, you didn't retort at all.

In the summer of 2012, you suddenly fell sick. You got hospitalised, your hair started to fall off in bunches, you got skinnier by the day. I learned how to make the simplest egg fried rice, I gave up on acting for that year, I stopped fighting with Grandmother, but your condition didn't get any better...

In the summer of 2012, what exactly did you experience in this village?

"I don't want you to stand in for me." Ning Ning hugged Ning Yu Ren tightly. It felt like as long as she hugged her tight enough, fate would not take Mama away from her arms, she thought: Even if you're sitting in Life Theater right now, even if I'm the main character of that movie, I will not let you stand in for me.

The night passed.

The next day, the village chief brought people to the Ning house. The moment the door opened, he stared at Ning Ning's face and said, "What, what happened to your face?"

"This child is not very obedient," Ning Yu Ren said stiffly, "I gave her a beating."

One side of her face was already swollen, she spoke inarticulately, "Even if you hit me till the other side of my face swells, I will not leave!"

Ning Yu Ren raised her hand. The village chief frantically rushed in between the two of them, "You can't hit her! You can't hit her! Ning Yu Ren, do you still not know the rules?!"

"Rules?" Ning Yu Ren let out a cold laughter, walking past them from the side. As she walked, she abruptly put her hands behind her back, looked back at them and said, "The rule says that if there were

two members of the Ning family present, we would pick the better one to be the owner."

"Owner?" Ning Ning was stunned.

"The village chief hasn't told you yet? The name of the nuo dance of this village, is called 'Life Opera House'." Ning Yu Ren's eyes gleamed. She stared at Ning Ning and said, "Between you and me, only one of us can wear the mask, only one of us can become the 'god' of this nuo dance—The Owner."

Chapter 149

149: Stand-in Dancer

A fight between a mother and a daughter, a fight over a role.

This was not the first time, but most probably, this would be the last.

"Village Chief," Ning Ning asked the village chief afterwards, "what kind of role is the owner?"

Mama looked self-assured, she probably knew how to perform the role. She didn't know what she was supposed to act as, she could only ask people who did know.

"Didn't I tell you before?" The village chief said amiably, "All you have to do is to sit and watch, you don't have to do anything else."

"...I understand, thank you."

That was his personal opinion. The best owner in his mind was a dummy who didn't move at all.

Ning Ning asked the others next. She asked everyone who could possibly know the answer. In the end, everyone gave her different answers. One said to be serious and stoic, another said to smile like a flower, another one said to act superior to mortals and hard to approach.

Suddenly, a familiar voice asked her, "Why don't you ask me?"

Ning Ning looked back and saw Pei Xuan standing behind her.

"Didn't you just return to the village?" Ning Ning smiled at him. "You're like me, a person who doesn't know anything."

"No, I do know." Pei Xuan suddenly walked forward, it forced Ning Ning into an alley behind her.

Ning Ning was only backing off by reflex. When she realised that she had retreated into an alley, she immediately shuddered. She wanted to walk forward but the tall Pei Xuan had blocked the entrance so she could not get out. She turned around and started to run. Who knew that just when she had taken two steps, a voice rang out behind her, "...The title of this film is < <A Chinese (Boy) Ghost Story> >."

Ning Ning stopped in her tracks.

She slowly looked back. She saw "Pei Xuan" abruptly crack a smile out of relief and said, "I am Wen Yu."

Half an hour later, at a field near the village.

Canola flowers bloomed across the mountains and plains, gold spreading out from beneath their feet out in all directions. With a gust of the wind, golden waves rolled across the mountains and plains. Amidst the wave sat a teenager, there was an easel in front of the teenager, they held a brush, painting a sea of gold on their canvas.

Ning Ning and Pei Xuan strolled by the fields of canola flowers.

"I arrived a month ago, I became like this the moment I arrived." Wen Yu sighed, he touched his face and said depressingly, "Will I be able to turn back?"

...Looking at his decadent and dispirited look, Ning Ning reckoned that Pei Xuan might not have any white hair, it was just that they had grown in this month from Wen Yu worrying too much.

"Of course you will." Ning Ning told him about Life Theater, along with a simple explanation of their current situation. She concluded at last, "When this movie ends, we will be able to go back."

"When will this movie end?" Wen Yu looked at her full of expectations. To him, Pei Xuan was a pest equivalent to a rat or a cockroach, no one would be willing to transmigrate as a pest, right?

"When the main character dies...that's not right!" Ning Ning suddenly realised a weird situation. She was shocked for a while before she murmured, "My grandfather is currently dead."

A chill came over both of them, even the warm sun could not dissipate it.

"Are you certain?" Wen Yu asked.

"...That's what my grandmother told me. She said that Grandfather had died long ago from illness, she raised my mom as a single parent." Ning Ning hesitated for a moment. "Whether that's true, only my grandmother knows... That's right, what about you, what are you here for?"

"Pei Xuan has been collecting information on Life Theater," Wen Yu continued, "it was not just him, he even involved a lot of people. The group of them have been collecting information for a few years. In the end, all the leads pointed towards this place."

As he finished, he took out a folded piece of paper and show it to her. "Look, this is Pei Xuan's plan. He was writing it halfway when I transmigrated as him a month ago."

Ning Ning opened the paper and took a look.

One: Prepare a change of clothes, climbing equipment, money, mosquito coils, essential balm, new mosquito nets...

Why are there so many mosquito repellants? Pei Xuan, are you that afraid of mosquitos?

Two: Get fake identification.

The ever cunning Pei Xuan, he had been well prepared. Even if the village chief were to check his identification, he would most probably not expose himself.

Three: Buy a ticket for the seventh. Arrive at the village on the eighth. Meet the village chief with the mask, claim to be Li Shui Sheng's son. Request to take part in the nuo dance ritual.

Four...

There is nothing after four...

"Li Xuan! Li Xuan!" From a distance, a man wearing a mask on his face walked towards them as he shouted, "Didn't I tell you to come learn the dance from me at eight in the morning? No sincerity! No determination! All you know is to flirt!"

Wen Yu took a look at him, then looked back at Ning Ning and said, "I'll go with him for now. Uncle Tie is a senior in the village, he knows a lot. I want to ask him some questions, I'll look for you later."

"Alright." Ning Ning looked at the time on her phone. "Then, I'll wait for you here at six in the evening."

Once he left, she suddenly regretted it, she thought, "Why must I wait here at six? We have nothing to do with each other now, we're just wandering around. I could have just gone with him, I could have even asked Uncle Tie, he's a senior of the village, he definitely knows something about the owner."

When her thoughts caught up to her, Ning Ning frantically walked towards the village.

Compared to the usual, the village was more rowdy and crowded, Ning Ning had to rub shoulders with another person from time to time. There seemed to only be one way to differentiate between the villagers and the people returning home in glory—masks.

She did not know what order the village chief had announced at the banquet after she got drunk and went home last night.

Starting from this morning, the streets were full of masked people.

Everyone of different surnames wore their old masks that had been passed down every generation. The workmanship was excellent, the colours were gorgeous. They looked like a human, a beast and a ghost at the same time. Other than that, some people were wearing identical masks—yin yang masks that had no facial features, the left of the face was black, the right of the face was white.

Masked person, normal person, masked person, normal person. Ning Ning was standing in the middle of the road. As they walked past her, it suddenly felt like she had returned to when < < Sneaking In > > had ended—the day she came out of the theater and looked out in the streets. Between the theater and the world, between the masked people and normal people, the moment when the final boundary that separated them was gone.

"Where's your mask?"

Ning Ning looked towards the voice and was surprised. "It's you?"

It was the masked young man who had led the three of them from the wild the day she arrived at the village.

He wore a ferocious mask that had four eyes and fangs as he stood in an alley and waved at her.

Ning Ning walked towards him and said, "Thanks for last time."

He smiled as he shook his head, he asked again, "Where is your mask?"

He was that concerned about that? Ning Ning answered, "I can't find it."

"You can't find it?" The young man in green clothes let out a laughter. "Do you want me to tell you where you've lost it?"

Ning Ning raised her eyebrows, "You know where it is?"

"Because I'm the one who lost it." He put up a finger and gestured a *shush* at her, there was an indescribable intimacy in it. "I accidentally damaged the mask, don't tell anyone."

...Based on how the village chief and villagers viewed the Ning family, how important they viewed the ancestor worship ceremony, if the matter of the damaged mask were to be known, he would probably have to be hung from a tree branch.

"Sure, I won't tell anyone," Ning Ning looked over, "but you have to tell me more about the owner."

"What's the matter?" The green-clothed young man laughed again. His laughter was very crisp and pleasant to the ears, it sounded like he was born to love to laugh, it made people think that if they were to remove his mask, they would definitely see two cute dimples. "Did the village chief not tell you?"

"He did." Ning Ning acted like the village chief, bending over and holding a cane, she said clumsily in an old-fashioned manner, "*Cough, cough*, didn't I tell you? All you have to do is to sit and watch, you don't have to do anything else."

The green-clothed young man guffawed. Not just guffawing, he was convulsing with laughter. He seemed easy to amuse. "Right, right, right, he told me that too."

Ning Ning looked at him doubtfully. "Hmm? Why did the village chief say that to you?"

The green-clothed young man blinked. "Do you know who Ah Tie is?"

"I do." Ning Ning nodded, then it suddenly became clear to her. "You're saying..."

"When the Li family is not around, Ah Tie stands in for them." The green-clothed young man said as he laughed, "It's the same for the Ning family."

Ning Ning sized him up, "You are the stand-in dancer for the Ning family?"

"That's right." The green-clothed young man shrugged his shoulders. "But I don't like to dance according to what he says, so he hates me a lot. The others, too, hate me. Besides the Nuo dance where they had no choice but to circle around me, they usually avoid me when they see me, they would even pretend not to see me."

It was no wonder that when Ning Ning entered the village with him, the others seemed to not be able to see him.

"I digress, I digress." The green-clothed young man shook his head and laughed. "Why did I start talking about the chief? You want to ask me questions about the owner, right?"

"...Oh, right." Ning Ning came back to her senses. "Tell me."

The green clothed young man seemingly smiled, "What do you

want to know?"

Ning Ning's feelings stirred, sure enough he knew.

If this village were to be a movie theater, those people who returned home in glory were people queuing up for tickets outside—they knew that the movie would be screening soon, but they absolutely didn't know if it would be a children's film, horror film or a romantic film.

The villagers, on the other hand, were split into two. Those wearing the yin yang masks were those sitting in the theater with tickets—although the movie had not started, they were seated in the audience seats, they knew the title of the movie and the names of the lead actors.

Finally, there were the representatives of each surname. They were the producers of the movie, as well as the leading and supporting characters. They knew what went on behind the scenes, they just didn't want to tell her.

But now there was a person who was willing to tell her!

One look at the mask on his face and she knew! It was not a yin yang mask, but a mask as ferocious as a ghost, this fellow belonged to the last group of people—a representative of a certain surname! Even if he was not, he was most probably one of their descendants.

"I'm about to perform as the owner," Ning Ning told him, "but I don't know what the owner is supposed to be like. Everyone in the village tells me different things."

"Let me think..." The green-clothed young man pondered for a moment, then laughed at her with deep meaning. "The prerequisite of being the owner—first, you have to be a person."

Ning Ning was stunned.

"Daughter of the Ning family!"

The village chief's voice rang out behind her, she looked back for a moment. It had been less than a second, but when she looked back again, the green-clothed young man was nowhere to be seen.

"I finally found you." The village chief walked over with the help of his cane. "Didn't you have trouble finding your mask? I found a carpenter from the neighbouring village, he can make you one for now, so that you make it in time... What's the matter? Who are you looking for?"

Ning Ning opened her mouth, about to ask about the green-clothed young man... Wait a minute.

...He said that the villagers pretended to not have seen him—that was not right. It was not just the villagers who said they could not see him, she remembered that when she asked her grandmother about him, she couldn't see him either.

"...It's nothing." Ning Ning took a final look at the direction the green-clothed young man disappeared in. She swallowed her words and told the village chief, "Let's go."

Back at home, the carpenter had been waiting for a long time. Upon seeing the village chief enter, he went up and greeted him with a smile, his hands were holding a wooden box. "Chief, it's done, what do you think?"

Ning Ning looked down at the mask in his box, she was stunned.

Fangs on all sides, ferocious and terrifying.

Wasn't this the same mask on the green-clothed young man's face?

Socialite's teatime

Ah Xia: Let's use this for the subject of today's tea party—how to make Little Angel fall into the river of love and not continue to bathe in the light of Buddhism where he is almost at the point of shaving his head and becoming a monk...

Shi Tou Ge: Big brother's lover...

Shi Tou Ge's female fans: Big brother's lover...

Ah Xia: Don't casually change the subject!! Don't run all of you! Get back here! Give me some ideas orz, everyone quickly think of something, pure love you can't die orz...

Chapter 150

150: What is God?

There were two owner candidates in the house, but there was only one mask.

Who would be the one to wear the mask in the end?

"It will have to do, although it doesn't have the quality of the original." The village chief flipped the mask over a few times. After nitpicking on it for a long while, he told Ning Ning, "I will get him to make some changes, take this time to get some practice in."

As he said that, he looked behind Ning Ning. "You have to look somewhat like her."

Ning Ning was taken aback, she turned around and looked behind her.

A ferocious and terrifying mask.

...No, not a mask.

"...Mama?" Ning Ning shouted in astonishment.

Standing in front of her was Ning Yu Ren. She had used a scarlet lipstick to draw on her face. She drew the ferocious mouth of a beast of prey, she drew fangs, she drew two lines of bloody tears under her eyes, she looked just like the mask in the village chief's hands.

"I'm hungry." She didn't even look at Ning Ning. After she said those two words, she left everyone in the room and sat at the dining table, holding up her cheek with one hand as she dozed off as if there were no one else around.

Ning Ning felt it was ridiculous at first, then she came back to her senses.

Mama's performance had begun.

She had started to perform as the owner she had envisioned, as for the results...Ning Ning took a peek at the village chief.

The village chief, who originally only had eyes for her alone, now had his attention snatched by Ning Yu Ren. He was stunned for an instant before he told the carpenter beside him, "Go get my daughter-

in-law."

His daughter-in-law arrived in no time. She directed a few peasant women behind her, they placed dishes in front of Ning Yu Ren. The covers were removed—roasted pork, fish head soup, eel segments, roasted duck and more—they billowed with white steam.

Upon smelling the aroma from the living room, Cui Hong Mei finally emerged from the bedroom. "Eh, meal is ready?"

She walked up to the table and was about to sit down. She abruptly looked back, asking with a weird expression, "Why are you all standing around?"

Ning Ning walked towards the table. Halfway through, she turned back and looked at the villagers.

Man and woman, old and young—the village chief included—they all watched them from afar. The dishes on the table were like offerings at a tombstone. Their expressions were that of people looking at the black and white photo of the deceased behind the offerings.

Ning Ning felt chills. She slowly turned back and finally knew why they had such an expression.

Unsmiling, aloof, not eating the food of common mortals, sitting expressionlessly in front of a pile of offerings—the Ning Yu Ren in this moment, didn't she look just like a photo of the deceased?

Even Cui Hong Mei who usually had nerves of steel could not take it anymore. She took a few bites before she put her chopsticks down, saying with displeasure, "Can you stop making such an expression? You're making the food taste bad."

Ning Yu Ren stared straight at her for a while, then she picked up her chopsticks. She touched every dish with the tip of her chopsticks, seemingly only touched the surface of the soup, then put them in her mouth for a taste. She put down her chopsticks.

"Tastes bad, give me a new table of dishes." She got up and left. The way she looked coldly at the onlookers made her look like another person.

"Hold up!" Cui Hong Mei slammed her chopsticks on the table, she got up as well. "Why are you copying your father for no reason?"

Ning Ning suddenly understood.

Mama's acting, in reality, was an imitation. In the past, she had

imitated people in the movies. Now, she imitated the previous owner—Grandfather.

Grandfather did not have a fixed image in Ning Ning's heart, he was like a smoke that was floating about. Now, with Ning Yu Ren's performance, an image was slowly forming.

Unsociable, egoistic, hard to get along with.

These characteristics were most probably developed from living with the villagers, because they actually responded with delight, "Yes, yes, yes, we will give you a new table of dishes immediately."

The others were also willing to devote themselves without complaints—working hard to cook, and bring the dishes over. Many of them had their clothes drenched in sweat—a dark coloured mark had formed on the back of their clothes when you see them from the back—but even so, they were all smiles when they walked over, taking back the plates of untouched dishes.

The only one who got angry was Cui Hong Mei. She stamped her foot and said, "Why are you taking them away? Why are you taking them away? I have not eaten yet!"

No one responded to her at all, someone even mocked her. A fifty-year-old middle-aged woman said cynically, "Stop taking advantage of your seniority. Don't think that you are part of the Ning family just because you married into their family. We have not forgotten where you were from, we have not forgotten the despicable methods you used to become their daughter-in-law."

The group of them laughed out loud as they brought the plates back. They even discussed splitting the dishes up on the way back—it was as if the dishes that Ning Yu Ren had touched had a certain type of magic, where their children would be healthier and smarter if they were to feed them those.

The village chief left as well, someone had called him over to take a look at the situation of the stage. Before he left, he gave Ning Ning's shoulder a pat, his tone was heavy, "You have to work harder, don't laze around in the village. Learn from your mother, learning has its benefits...you don't want to be replaced by your mother, right?"

"What does she know? What do they know?" After they left, Cui Hong Mei was left to stomp her feet in anger. "I married into the Ning family, of course I'm a Ning family member. I didn't do anything despicable! When I first met Ah Qing, I didn't know he was the owner, I just thought he looked especially good...so I stole some braised pork

shoulder with soy sauce to gain his favour!"

Afterwards, the villagers laid out a table of new dishes. Like before, there was meat and vegetables, there was alcohol, there was also braised pork shoulder with soy sauce. Ning Yu Ren did not eat the braised pork shoulder with soy sauce, she barely touched the other dishes as well. But whichever dish she ate, the family that had prepared it cheered, they had that flushed look of someone who wished they could tell the world all about it, they simply looked like fanatical zealots.

"...Please taste it." A frail voice rang out under Ning Ning's legs. She looked down and saw a little girl who was no more than seven or eight years old. She was wearing scarlet clothes and a flower headdress, holding a bowl of braised pork in brown sauce with both hands, there was a pair of wooden chopsticks on the bowl. She looked at Ning Ning with uneasiness and expectations.

Ning Ning could not reject such an expression.

She picked up the chopsticks and grabbed a piece of braised pork in brown sauce, ate it then smiled at her. "It's delicious, thank you."

The little girl's eyes widened, not from being overwhelmed by flattery or honour, but from astonishment and blame. She frowned and said, "How can you say thank you? You..."

Her mother walked over and covered her mouth, pulling her into her embrace then smiled at Ning Ning weirdly.

That bowl of braised pork in brown sauce was brought in front of Ning Yu Ren, Ning Yu Ren showed Ning Ning the correct way to eat it—she didn't eat such oily food, her chopsticks immediately went over the top of the bowl. Not only did the mother and daughter not blame her, they had the expression of profound respect and humility instead, as if they were the ones who had made a mistake.

"Do I have to turn into that as well?" Ning Ning murmured to herself.

Was the owner supposed to be like that?

No one answered her question, because everyone's attention was focused on Ning Yu Ren. There was fanaticism, there was nostalgia, there was also greed.

Ning Ning looked at them from afar, then turned around and walked out of the house. As she walked and walked, she unknowingly had walked to the field of canola flowers beside the village. She

crossed her legs and sat down, watching a pair of white butterflies dancing around the flowers in a daze as she waited for Wen Yu.

She did not have lunch or dinner, her stomach started to grumble.

The sky gradually darkened, the two butterflies were long gone, the green mountains in the distance were now black, a few tired birds had returned to their nests.

Wen Yu had not returned.

Looking at the time, it had long been past six, it was going to be seven soon. After missing lunch and dinner, Ning Ning's hunger worsened.

She looked down at the canola flowers on the ground...speaking of which, could canola flowers be eaten raw?

"To eat, not to eat, to eat, not to eat..." Ning Ning plucked a canola flower and started to pluck its petals— if the last petal was 'to eat' she would eat it, if the last petal was 'not to eat' she would not eat it.

"Here."

Ning Ning looked back, a bowl of braised pork shoulder with soy sauce was in front of her.

The green-clothed young man stood bent over behind her, shaking the braised pork shoulder with soy sauce in his hands and laughed, "I just stole it, help me destroy the evidence?"

"...No problem."

Ning Ning hugged the braised pork shoulder with soy sauce and devoured it as she stole glances at him.

His green clothes were stained with sauce, his fingers were oily, completely unbecoming of a deity, it was too grounded. Ning Ning started to suspect that he was her grandfather, but she then hesitated. After all, in terms of personality, he was too different from what Mama had portrayed and what the villagers had described of him.

"Your teeth are going to break if you continue to gnaw on it like that." The green-clothed young man laughed as he asked, "Do you want me to go back and grab two more pieces?"

Ning Ning spat out the bone she had just cleaned off, then wiped her mouth and looked at him as if she wanted to say something.

As she looked at the mask on his face...

"What's the matter?" The green-clothed young man touched the

mask on his face, "What are you thinking of?"

If he was not her grandfather, how would one explain the mask?

You see, the mask on a masked person's face was linked to that person's life and personality. For example, the peach coloured eyes on Shi Zhong Tang's mask and how Boss Qu's mask was the last mask he bought with his daughter when they went shopping.

It was not something she could easily ask. Her attention shifted to the remnants of the braised pork shoulder with soy sauce in the corner of her eyes, Ning Ning looked back and said, "I'm thinking about my grandmother."

"Oh? Let's hear it."

Ning Ning retold what happened at home in the afternoon, then flipped her eyelids and acted as the mean middle-aged woman, shaking her head and saying cynically, "Stop taking advantage of your seniority. Don't think you are part of the Ning family just because you married into their family. We have not forgotten where you were from, we have not forgotten the despicable methods..."

"That's not it," the green-clothed young man interrupted her as he laughed, "your grandmother did not use any despicable methods."

Ning Ning looked up at him.

"With the mask you are a god, without the mask you are a mortal." The flowers on the mountain looked brilliant, he laughed amidst the grass, "Everyone loved his face with the mask, only your grandmother loved him without the mask. Even if she was hankering after his good looks, it was enough for him to feel gratified."

"Who was he?"

"Your grandfather."

"How do you know about my grandfather?"

"Haha, I know everything."

Ning Ning's eyes sparkled for a moment, as if unintentional she asked, "In your opinion, what should I do in order to become the owner?"

The green-clothed young man tilted his head to the side and took a look at her, he turned around and said, "Follow me."

Ning Ning frantically got off from the ground and chased after him.

The two of them walked one after another for quite a while, the

road became more and more rugged, it became harder and harder to walk. Ning Ning took a look back, the village and the canola flower field was no longer behind her.

"We're here." The green clothed young man's voice rang out in front of her.

Ning Ning turned back and looked over, he was pointing at a place in front of him as he said, "It's over there, go dig it up."

Dig it up?

Ning Ning looked to the front. What was buried in the grass and fallen leaves? It couldn't be the missing mask of the owner?

If she were to find the lost mask, she would be the owner?

With a trace of doubt and expectation, Ning Ning walked over.

"Ning Ning! Stop!!" Wen Yu's voice suddenly rang out behind her.

But he was too late.

A pair of hands hugged Ning Ning from behind, in the end, the two of them slipped and slid down together.

As they were sliding down, Ning Ning's back started to sweat—what grass? What fallen leaves? In front of her was clearly a dry well, she had been tricked!

A loud crash rang out from the bottom of the well, afterwards, it reverted back to silence.

"...Wen Yu, Wen Yu, are you alright?" After a long while, Ning Ning's voice rang out first, she called out many times, but there was no answer.

A pair of green cloth shoes stepped on the fallen leaves on the ground. They walked to the side of the well slowly. The green-clothed young man had his hands behind his back, bending over and looking into the well.

The well was not very deep, but the people who fell in would never be able to climb out by themselves. There was no water in it, but there was a layer of fallen leaves. On top of them were two people in each other's arms, the man was unconscious, the girl looked up and shouted at him, "Why are you doing this?!"

"The country has disintegrated, Emperor Chongzhen was hanged on Jingshan¹, the people were forced to leave their homes, a portion of the people fled from the Qing army rebels into the barren mountains."

The green-clothed young man looked down at them, "The person who led this group of people was the ancestor of the Ning family, the owner of Life Opera House at that time."

The bottom of the well was silent for a moment.

"What's the biggest right of the owner? It's that wherever he goes, he can bring Life Opera House along with him." The green-clothed young man said, "Watching the refugees that escaped along with him die one by one, the owner started to think. He finally thought of a way, a way to enable people to survive, that way was—a sacrifice."

Volunteers started appearing among the refugees. For the sake of letting more people survive, some of them volunteered to become a masked person, some of them volunteered to enter Life Opera House and watch plays, then through the plays changed the fate of the people.

It was a noble thing, it was also a dangerous thing.

Some succeeded, some failed, some advanced, some cowered. Until the end, the group of them—from the different corners of the country, the refugees with different surnames—relying on the power of Life Opera House, they finally arrived at their utopia and built the Ning Village.

"...Do you understand now? The Ning Village was built upon a sacrifice." The moon was dark and gloomy, his expression behind the mask was even more dark and gloomy. The green-clothed young man stood by the well, rustling leaves swirled by him in the wind, he looked down at Ning Ning in the well and smiled gently. "Sacrifice him. I will pull you out, then personally teach you how to be the owner."

Ning Ning was stunned, she looked down at Wen Yu who was in her arms.

...For the sake of guarding herself, and Wen Yu who was bleeding.

1Jingshan Park is an imperial park covering 23 hectares (57 acres) immediately north of the Forbidden City in the Imperial City area of Beijing, China. The focal point is the artificial hill Jingshan, literally "Prospect Hill".

Chapter 151

151: Sacrifice

Day one, no water.

Ning Ning licked her dry lips. She looked up, the sounds of cicadas rang out from outside the round well.

"...Where are we?" An equally dry voice rang out.

Ning Ning looked down and saw that Wen Yu had finally woken up. A ray of sunlight shone into the well, falling upon his bruised face.

"In a well." Ning Ning said.

Wen Yu struggled to get up with one arm, but he was unable to do so as he fell back down. His head was laid on Ning Ning's knees, he closed his eyes for a moment before he reopened them and looked at her. "Why must you do this?"

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment, then she understood. Wen Yu could not see the green-clothed young man, so from what he saw, Ning Ning had willingly jumped into the well instead of being tricked into falling in.

Just as Ning Ning was thinking about how to explain the matter, Wen Yu suddenly asked, "Do you have any regrets?"

...Why did he suddenly ask that? Ning Ning nodded.

"Have you ever had a crush on someone?" Wen Yu continued asking.

Ning Ning hesitated for a moment, then she nodded.

"Of course you have clothes you want but couldn't get, food you want but couldn't have, right?" Wen Yu smiled a little. The sunlight on his face was bright and beautiful, but it was not as bright and beautiful as his smile. "So what are you still depressed about? Becoming young again, becoming yourself in your teenage years, it means that a lot of things can be redone, a lot of regrets can be remedied, this is a good thing."

"...I'm not depressed." Ning Ning said, she did not fall into the well for that reason.

"That's good to hear." Wen Yu raised his hand with difficulty and touched her head. "If you do, just look at me, my hair is already white, I'm already an old fogey..."

"Pei Xuan is the old fogey, not you." Ning Ning tilted her head and avoided his hand. "...Don't treat me like a child."

But she quickly realised, compared to him...she was indeed a child.

Day two, no food.

Ning Ning opened her eyes, wishing that everything that happened the day before was a nightmare. The sound of cicadas could be heard from outside the round well.

...So it was not a dream.

She turned and looked at Wen Yu, the injury on his head had scabbed, but his breathing was getting weaker...it was so weak that Ning Ning could not help but place her face close to his, like a little animal that was sniffing a person, it was not until she sensed his weak breathing that she was relieved.

It couldn't go on like this.

Ning Ning cleared her throat, looked up to the top of the well and shouted, "Help!"

...Such a small voice, it couldn't even compare to a single cicada, how was she supposed to get people to rescue them?

"Help!" Ning Ning shouted louder. In the end, what was strained wasn't her throat, but her stomach. She hugged her stomach, she felt like she could eat a horse. Her stomach felt like it was on fire due to starvation, it was unable to take any more energy consumption.

"Help! Help! Help...ah." Ning Ning could not help but drop her head, whispering, "I'm so hungry..."

Plop.

Something fell on Ning Ning's bare nape.

Ning Ning reflexively touched it, then...

"Ahhhhh!!!"

Ning Ning's screams echoed off the entire well.

Ning Ning jumped about like crazy, both her hands patting her body repeatedly. Yet, she did not dare to pat her nape, because...there was a worm there.

"Come here." An impatient voice rang out.

Ning Ning turned around and took a look, she saw that Wen Yu had already woken up. She frantically brought her nape close to him as she sobbed repeatedly, "Quickly help me take it off!! Ah!! I can feel it trying to crawl into my clothes."

Wen Yu took the worm off her.

Ning Ning immediately retreated far away from him like a bird frightened by the twang of a bow, placing her back tightly on the wall of the well. Her eyes were fixed on Wen Yu's hand which was holding a completely green and fat worm that was still wriggling, the back of her neck that the worm had crawled on started to have goosebumps.

"Why are you still holding that?" Ning Ning said with a face of disgust.

"Why can't I hold it?" Wen Yu started laughing instead, holding the worm. "Rich in nutrition, high in protein, this is our breakfast."

"Breakfast???"

Wen Yu looked above their heads. Ning Ning gazed where he was looking at, like two frogs in a well, they could only see the sky in the shape of the top of the well.

"Before the villagers find us, we have to live." Wen Yu looked back at Ning Ning as he said seriously, "If humans want to live, we have to eat."

After he finished speaking, he handed the worm to Ning Ning.

...The well was only that big, his hand moved to wherever Ning Ning shifted to. Ning Ning's face gradually turned pale, her shoulders were shuddering, her eyes filled with despair, as if what Wen Yu was holding was not a worm, but a gun.

"...You can have it." Her voice trembled, she said with her final struggle, "I'm not hungry."

Wen Yu looked at her, then looked at the worm in his hand. He hesitated a moment before he viciously bit it in half.

"...Alright." He swallowed it whole. Wen Yu gave Ning Ning the remaining half with a terrible look on his face. "Your turn, stay strong."

"...This concubine can't do it." Ning Ning looked at half of the fresh corpse in his hand. She was on the verge of tears as she desperately pushed herself up the well's wall, wishing that she could become a

painting immediately.

But as stated earlier, the well was only that big.

Wen Yu held his breath as he bounced up from the ground and pounced at her. Ning Ning did not have anywhere to dodge to as she was force fed half of the worm.

"Ugh, ugh..." Ning Ning's face turned green, she felt like she was about to vomit.

"You're not allowed to vomit." Wen Yu covered her mouth. "Swallow it, no matter what you have to survive."

...Just let me die.

Day three, heavy rain.

Ning Ning murmured, "...We're really going to die now."

She had thought that the day before was the worst day of her life, she was wrong. Today was the worst day of her life.

A few thunder roared above her head. She looked up, the dark clouds above her trundled, lightning flashed and thunder rumbled continuously, rainwater was like a waterfall from the sky as it poured into the well.

Ning Ning shivered in the rain.

How long will this rain last? Will it fill up the well? Even if it didn't, if it rained for a very long time, it would mean a drop in temperature, falling sick...

"Haha."

Ning Ning slowly looked down and said coldly, "Are you crazy? How can you laugh at this time?"

She knew that her attitude was bad, she did not want to treat Wen Yu with such a bad attitude either, but she had had a few consecutive nightmares about worms already...

"This is a gift from heaven." Wen Yu raised both hands, clear water falling into his palms. He brought the pool of water in his hands to Ning Ning's mouth, "Drink up."

"..." Ning Ning looked at him, the rain made it hard for her to open her eyes.

"Who knows when it will rain next." Wen Yu said gently, "If you're not willing to eat worms, then drink more water."

Ning Ning was at first too busy feeling afraid until the moment he reminded her. The thirst from not having any drink for two days quickly overwhelmed her throat. She licked her dry lips, then drank a little bit of the water on Wen Yu's hands.

After she finished drinking, Wen Yu continued to catch more water and feed her.

"...You should drink some too." Ning Ning suddenly said. She held her hands up and caught a handful of rainwater, bringing it to Wen Yu's lips.

He smiled, did not reject it, tilted his head down and drank the water from her hands.

Day four, Wen Yu fell sick.

"*Sob, sob, sob, sob, sob...*" Ning Ning held Wen Yu as she cried ceaselessly.

Wen Yu coughed twice, his face was an unnatural red, "Don't cry, crying won't solve the problem."

"I know." Ning Ning cried, "But besides crying, I cannot do anything else."

She tried to scale the walls, but she would fall down after climbing one meter up. She tried to shout for help, but only the sounds of cicadas answered her. She tried praying, from Buddha to the flying spaghetti monster, none of them answered her prayers. When one was unable to do anything, what could she do?

She could only cry, hate the person that caused them to fall in there, hate herself who was useless.

"How's it going?" A cheerful voice rang out above her. Ning Ning looked up, the green-clothed young man with a mask appeared at the top of the well which originally only had the sky. He looked down and laughed. "Have you decided? Do you want me to pull you up?"

"...Hurry up!" Ning Ning reached out with her hands, indicating for him to quickly think of a way to pull her up. She had made up her mind. Once she got out, she would not care about the sacrifice or the owner, she would immediately get someone to save Wen Yu! Also beat him up while she was at it!

"You cannot go back on your words." The green-clothed young man took a look at Wen Yu. "I will pull you up after he dies."

"...There's nothing to eat or drink here, when he dies, I will also be

on the verge of death!"

"You won't, you won't." The green-clothed young man consoled her, "He's so sick, if you leave him alone, he will die very quickly."

"...But I..." Ning Ning turned and looked at Wen Yu, murmuring, "How can I possibly leave him alone?"

Wen Yu looked up to the top of the well. After a while, he shifted his vision onto her. "Who are you talking to?"

Ning Ning looked towards the top of the well again. There was no trace of the green-clothed young man anymore, there was only a rainwashed leaf slowly twirling and falling into the well.

"...No one." Ning Ning said stiffly.

Wen Yu closed his eyes for a moment, then he opened them and said, "I was wrong, you have been able to see people I couldn't."

Ning Ning remained silent.

"Not only you, my patients as well, Madam Qin for example." Wen Yu let out a bitter laugh. "What you have been saying is all true. All of you really have an invisible person around you, there really is a movie theater that can change the past in this world...it's just that an ordinary person like me can't see it."

"It's a good thing to not be able to see them." Ning Ning said, "If I had another chance..."

She got stuck.

Because she realised that if she were to have another chance, she would most probably still walk into the theater. For the sake of acting skills, for the sake of her dreams, for the sake of her mother, for the chance at changing her fate.

Wen Yu looked at her for a while, he smiled and said, "Although I cannot see, I can roughly guess what he told you."

"You're not allowed to guess."

"Did he want you to give up on me?"

"No."

"Just give up."

"I can't."

"What's the matter?" Wen Yu looked at her gently, "One person

living is better than two persons dying here."

Ning Ning looked down, held back her tears and didn't say a word.

She remembered the story the green-clothed young man told her.

"Volunteers started appearing amongst the refugees."

"Some of them volunteered to become a masked person, some of them volunteered to enter Life Opera House and watch plays."

"The Ning Village was built upon sacrifice."

What did the owner think of while facing these people?

"Owner!"

"Owner."

"Owner..."

At that moment, male and female, lots of voices rang out by Ning Ning's ears. They were in a mad rush to be the first, they sounded both near and far, like the voices from when a movie began, it pulled Ning Ning in.

Ning Ning looked up absent-mindedly, she had arrived at a wrecked wasteland, not far from her was a group of refugees in ancient clothes. Some of them were digging the grass silently, some of them were holding their broken arms as they curled up on the ground and wailed, one of them was leaning on a tree trunk with her top open as she nursed a baby, the baby sucked a few times then started to cry out. Someone went over and pushed the woman a couple of times only to realise that the woman had stopped breathing.

Two people staggered towards Ning Ning, the one on the left was covered with silvery hair, the one on the right was a child.

The old man knelt in front of Ning Ning. "Old Xiu wants to become a masked person."

"Why?" Ning Ning asked, "After turning into a masked man, you will always have to stay in Life Opera House."

"I know," the old man said, "Old Xiu is doing it voluntarily."

"After Grandpa becomes a masked person, I will go in and watch his play." The child said, "This time, I would still follow you, I would still escape with everyone to look for our utopia. But when we cross the river, I would get everyone to cover every child's mouth with a cloth, we wouldn't repeat the incident where we attracted pursuing soldiers because of the cries of the children at night."

"What if you don't succeed?"

"I will go in and try again."

"Even if you succeed, what if the pursuing soldiers appear because of another reason?"

"I will go in and try again."

"Do you know?" Ning Ning looked at him in a serious manner. "After doing it three times, you would have to stay in Life Opera House forever after you turn into a masked person."

"I know." The child started laughing innocently, revealing his buck teeth. "I'm doing it voluntarily."

Another person came over, it was a woman who was limping, staggering up to the back of the child. After hearing what he had to say, she smiled and touched his head as she said, "When that time comes, Auntie Wu will watch your play."

The Ning Village was really built upon sacrifices.

—The self sacrifices of countless people.

Ning Ning closed her eyes, gritted her teeth and said, "...I don't want it anymore."

When she opened her eyes again, the old man, child and woman in front of her were gone, the starving people with broken arms along with the dead mother were also gone. She was standing in the dry well again, looking at the man beside her.

...You gotta be kidding me, I will definitely not let you sacrifice yourself! Instead of watching you sacrifice yourself, why don't I...

"I don't want to be the owner anymore!!" Ning Ning took a deep breath and shouted at the top of the well, "I don't want it anymore! I don't want to be the owner anymore!!"

Don't want it anymore...

Want it anymore...

Anymore...

"Ahead of us! It's ahead of us!"

"Where? Where? Huh, why is there a well here?"

"Where's the flashlight? Hand me the flashlight quickly!"

A hubbub of voices approached them. Suddenly, a ray of white

light shone into the well, it was so glaring that Ning Ning had to cover her face with her hand.

"Found them! They are here!"

"How did they fall into the well?"

"Rope, quickly give me the rope!"

"Ning Ning!" Ning Yu Ren had already squeezed into the crowd, shouting into the well while on all fours, "It's alright now, Mama will rescue you right now!"

Day five.

Rude awakening from the dream, the first reaction was to look up.

Swaying above her head was a white mosquito net, not the round top of the well.

"...I'm saved." Ning Ning sighed, her voice was a little husky, her body was also a little sore, thus she called out like a spoiled child, "Mama, I want a cup of water."

The sounds of pouring water rang out behind her, then followed by swift footsteps approaching her.

Ning Ning turned around on the bed. Just as she was about to take the cup out of Ning Yu Ren's hand, she was stunned.

Outside the gently swaying net was a whole group of people.

The village chief, the representatives of each surname, the people that were born and raised in the village, the people who had returned in glory—every single one of them was there, quietly standing outside the tent, waiting for her to wake up.

The person who served her water was even the village chief himself.

"You're awake." The village chief said amiably, "Get up and take a sip of water."

The situation in front of her was unbelievably weird, but no matter what, when a senior poured a cup of tea for you, she could not not drink it under the watchful eyes of the others. Ning Ning could only struggle to get up, reached out for the cup and quickly took a sip, then put the cup down and asked, "Village Chief, is something the matter?"

"I'm representing everyone in the village to thank you." The village chief smiled.

"Thank me?" Ning Ning was a little confused. "Why are you thanking me?"

"Thanks for putting yourself in danger and getting it back from the well." The village chief looked at Ning Ning's side.

Ning Ning looked at the direction they were looking at and realised that underneath her pillow, was a mask.

...Fangs on all sides, ferocious and terrifying.

It was the owner's mask.

At first she thought that it was the one the carpenter had made, but she picked it up and took a closer look and realised that it was different. The biggest difference was that it was too old. Coupled with the lack of maintenance, the originally resplendent colours were already mottled now, there was a long notch from the right eye down to the cheek, it looked like someone had carved it out with a knife.

"This is Heaven's will, Heaven's will has chosen you to be the owner." The village chief turned around and shouted at the crowd, "Would all of you say so?"

"Yes, yes."

"I also think that the one who has not been married off is better than the one who has."

"Hehe, how is this the question of whether she has been married off or not? This is clearly..."

"It's Heaven's will, the mask has been lost for such a long time, she found it the moment she came back."

"Haha, since everyone has agreed." The village chief clapped. "Come in!"

The door suddenly opened, two women walked in, they each held a wooden plate, on the plates were clothes and accessories, they were all not modern but full of decadent flavour.

"...What are you trying to do?" Ning Ning.

"Owner, we are here to serve you." One of the women said with a smile. The two of them held down Ning Ning who had wanted to run away. One of them put clothes on her, one of them put the accessories on her. At last, the village chief came up personally holding up the mask with both hands, slowly putting it on Ning Ning's face.

"I don't want to be the owner." Ning Ning's voice rang out

underneath the mask.

"You have to." The village chief stared at her eyes that were underneath the mask. "Something happened with your mother, but good thing we still have you. No...we only have you now."

He had such an avaricious look, the people behind him had such avaricious looks, it was not the self-sacrificing look Ning Ning had seen.

It was the look of someone forcing others to be a sacrifice.

Little Theater:

[Sweet Talk Version]

Shi Tou Ge: My flesh is delicious, do you want to have a bite..then my blood will become your blood, my flesh will become your flesh.

[Godfather Version]

Three minutes: Godfather!!

Ah Xia: Godfather is here, I will immediately prepare a scarlet double happiness bed, a red wine to help celebrate, some oral supplies...they will be airdropped to you in three minutes.

Chapter 152

152: House Arrest

Ning Ning was under house arrest.

"No, no, how could we put you under house arrest?" The village chief refused to admit it as he smiled. "We are just afraid that you will get lost. So, before your mother comes back to fetch you, we have to look after you in your mother's stead."

"Where did my mother go?" Ning Ning asked.

"She got a call all of a sudden, it seemed like a big movie is about to start filming. The director designated her as the actress, so she had to rush back through the night." The village chief looked back. "I am not clear about the details either, you can ask him...come in!"

A familiar figure walked in.

It was Mama's manager from the past—also her current manager—Li Bo Yue.

"It is Director Chen's <<Cathay's Centennial>>." Li Bo Yue said as he walked over, "It has over a hundred million in investments. It's a film aiming for the Oscars, a lot of big stars are asking for a role while lowering their rates, your mom wants to elevate her career to the next level, so she cannot let this opportunity slip by."

That was a lie. Ning Ning looked at him.

There was a film named <<Cathay's Centennial>> that year, but the female lead was not Mama. Mama retired from public life due to illness, becoming bedridden with lingering sickness from then on, never participating in the filming of any films ever again.

Speaking of which...the time which Mama fell sick, it seemed to be after she returned from the ancestor worship ceremony?

"She arranged for me to stay and accompany you." Li Bo Yu opened his briefcase, took out something and handed it to her. "Here."

Ning Ning took a look, she was speechless. It was a handheld console.

"I still have work on hand, I can't accompany you at every moment, so I prepared these." Li Bo Yue held his briefcase, continuously taking

things out, boxes of game cartridges were laid out on Ning Ning's bed. "This should be enough for one summer vacation right?"

It was not just for one summer vacation, it was enough for her to kill time until the next summer vacation.

But that was really strange...Li Bo Yue was such a career-minded person, why would he miss the chance to fight for the female lead in < <Cathay's Centennial> > and stay in the countryside to watch her play games?

"Why are you the one to stay here?" Ning Ning switched on the handheld console. "You are the one who handles Mama's work affairs, she won't be able to handle it without you, right? If it's just accompanying me to play games, anyone can do it."

"Maybe compared to her job, your mother values you more." Li Bo Yue said with a smile, then waved the phone in his hand. "We'll talk later, we can talk on the phone if anything comes up."

Ning Ning blinked. "Lend me your phone to make a call, I lost mine."

After she woke up, she had not seen her phone, when she asked the others, they said that they had not seen it, the village chief asked if she had dropped it in the well.

"Sure." Li Bo Yue handed the phone over. "Call away."

Ning Ning took the phone and dialed a number, the next second, a phone rang...both Li Bo Yue and her looked at the village chief.

It was a hip-hop tune that completely did not fit the style of the village, a song named < <Orc> > flowed out of the village chief's pocket. Facing Ning Ning's questioning look, he grinned and placed his hand into his pocket. "Someone's looking for me, I'll go out to take this call."

Ning Ning hung up expressionlessly, the ringing from the village chief's pocket immediately stopped, but he walked out unswayed. After his figure disappeared from the doorway, Ning Ning immediately told Li Bo Yue in a low voice, "This person, no, this village is strange."

Li Bo Yue's eyes sparkled. "How so?"

"I don't know," Ning Ning said, "but did my mom really go back to film a movie? Did you see it with your own eyes? Forget it, I'll call and ask myself."

She gave Ning Yu Ren a call.

"Hello." Ning Yu Ren answered the call very quickly.

"Mama," Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief, "where are you now?"

"I'm at the director's house, the audition is about to start." Ning Yu Ren laughed.

"Is there anyone else there?" Ning Ning asked.

"There's a lot of people here, Liu Xiao, Zhao Lin Zhi, Liu Tian Tian..." Ning Yu Ren listed out the names of a few famous actors and actresses.

That was strange, what exactly was wrong?

The village chief previously said that something came up for Mama. Was that 'something' really her going back to film a movie?

"What a coincidence! Since Teacher Liu is also there, can you help me ask her about the matter from last time?" Ning Ning suddenly said.

Ning Yu Ren fell silent for a moment. she had mentioned two people with the Liu surname just now, which one of them was the 'Teacher Liu' Ning Ning mentioned?

"...Alright, I'll ask her later." Ning Yu Ren answered.

"Don't tell me you have forgotten?" Ning Ning said doubtfully.

"Yes...there have been a lot of things recently, remind me."

"The matter of taking me in as a student!"

"Oh, oh! I remember now!" Ning Yu Ren sounded like she suddenly saw the light, then she laughed, "Director Chen is calling for me, I will ask Teacher Liu later then call you back."

She used this reason to hang up on Ning Ning.

Ning Ning looked at the phone in her hand, she said in her heart: You are not my mama.

What 'matter' from last time? There was no such thing at all. Ning Ning had never mentioned anything about getting a teacher to Ning Yu Ren before. Even if she wanted to, she would not get a teacher who was not Ning Yu Ren. As for Ning Yu Ren herself, if she were to pick a teacher for her daughter, she would not pick those two popular actresses, she would pick a senior actor who was not as popular.

Then who was she?

Speaking of which, during the meeting at the village chief's house that night—amidst the people who returned home in glory—she seemed to have seen a famous person, a person who attended the Spring Festival Gala, performing a wonderful skill—vocal mimicry.

"Alright." Li Bo Yue took the phone out of Ning Ning's hand and told her, "That's all there is to it. Your mother is busy, don't bother her on a whim, bother me or play some games."

Ning Ning nodded obediently, looking down to play her game.

Both the village chief and Li Bo Yue were not trustworthy, she should wait to meet with Wen Yu.

Three days later.

That's strange...where's Wen Yu?

Ning Ning looked down and played her game, the character in it was rushing around the screen, it was very quickly surrounded by monsters. Game over—big blood red words floated on the screen.

She felt flighty and impetuous. She tossed the console to the side, a few children surrounded her as they laughed.

"Owner, you died again."

"Play another round."

"Want to play online with me? I will guide you."

"Forget it." Ning Ning did not want to play the game at all. Grandmother disappeared, Mama disappeared, Wen Yu was also nowhere to be seen now. When she asked the villagers where he was, they said that they didn't know. Not only did the adults say that they didn't know, the children also denied knowing anything when asked. Ning Ning pondered for a moment, then changed her inquiry method. "I'm sick of playing this everyday, speaking of which, what do you all usually play?"

A child smiled broadly. "Owner, do you want to play with us?"

"First, tell me what you have been playing recently." Ning Ning said.

Even if they were a child, but a child who wore a mask could not be an ordinary child. They either had a standing in the village, or were especially clever and sensible, which was why they were sent to play with her and watch over her in the meantime.

"Spinning tops." One of the children smiled.

"Tops?" Ning Ning said, "Deal, bring them and we'll spin them together."

"We can't bring them over, they are too big."

"How big can a spinning top be? It can't be bigger than a person?"

That child started laughing, the other children laughed along. One of them said while laughing, "It is a person."

The child immediately shut his mouth as he said that, but Ning Ning had already looked over. She asked, "The top you guys are spinning...is a person?"

The child that had let it slip looked down, the other children turned to look at him.

"Take me there so I can take a look." Ning Ning said. After a while, she saw that all the children remained rooted on the spot. She decided to walk towards the entrance. As she approached the door, a flurry of footsteps rang out behind her. She looked back and saw that the masked brats were following behind her.

They only followed her, none of them led her.

It was almost lunch time, smoke came out of every house's chimneys. The villagers Ning Ning had met on her way had greeted her passionately, the children behind her laughed noisily. The afternoon sun was so warm, a dog was snoring in front of the house, the petals of a dandelion floated past its nose, causing it to sneeze, it opened its pitch black eyes and chased after the dandelion.

Ning Ning had arrived at Wen Yu's Nuo dance teacher, Ah Tie's house.

Ah Tie's house also had a dog, it started to bark as it saw a stranger.

"What are you barking at? What are you barking at?" Ah Tie rushed out of the house and gave his dog a kick, the dog ran away as it whimpered. He took a swig out of his beer bottle then burped, asking with a breath of alcohol, "What brings you here?"

"I'm here to ask about Li Xuan." Ning Ning said.

"Him." Ah Tie seemed to not want to talk about that name, he waved his hand and said impatiently, "He could not take the hardship, so he left."

"He was hurt when he fell into the well, how could he have left?" Ning Ning asked.

"How would I know?" Ah Tie said, "Maybe he thought that the medical standards from a small village like this is too poor, so he went looking for a doctor in the big city."

The words from these people were flawless, she could not find enough loopholes.

"But what would we do about the ancestor worship ceremony now that he's gone?" Ning Ning asked, "Who will portray the role of the exorcist? Would it still be you?"

Compared to discussing Wen Yu, Ah Tie seemed to not want to talk about this even more. He took another swig of beer, saying in a low muffled voice, "It's not me."

At that moment, Ning Ning felt that alcohol was really a good thing, alcohol was really her good buddy. She asked him in a hurry, "Then who is it?"

Ah Tie opened his mouth, but his eyes looked towards what was behind Ning Ning.

Ning Ning quickly looked back.

Shhh.

All the children behind had put their fingers up to their lips silently.

She looked back again, Ah Tie had already sobered up. He tossed out the next line coldly, "You'll see on the day itself."

Afterwards, he left Ning Ning and the rest behind as he swayed back into the house holding his beer bottle. The door closed with a bang.

Just as she was about to leave, Ning Ning stopped when she walked by the dog kennel. It was only a 'dog kennel' in name. In reality, it was the casing of an old television, the screen was gone, torn paper and cloth were laid inside. Ning Ning bent down and picked up a piece of cloth, there was a little blood on it. Why did the colour of this cloth look a little like...Wen Yu's clothes?

"Owner, dirty." The children surrounded her. "Quickly throw it away."

"Oh." Ning Ning answered and stuffed the cloth into her pocket. She walked towards the other side of the street, stopping a husband and wife couple who were wearing modern clothes. "Can you lend me your phone? I want to make a call."

The couple looked at each other. The woman was hesitating, but the man blurted, "Sorry, we didn't bring our phone... We have matters to attend to, we'll be on our way."

After they left, Ning Ning stopped a few others, but it always resulted in the same thing. Why? At the last attempt, Ning Ning abruptly looked back. As expected, that group of children had their fingers put up, standing behind her silently, shhh.

Ning Ning slowly turned her head back, walking forward.

"You cannot go further." A child behind her said.

Ning Ning ignored him, she continued walking.

"You'll be out of the village if you keep walking."

That was exactly what Ning Ning wanted. Since she could not make a call, she would walk out.

"The owner is running away!"

In the wake of the shouts of the few children, an old man hopped out of his rocking chair, a woman who had been washing vegetables in front of her house dropped the vegetables in her hand, there were even more people who ran over from a distance away. The people who had greeted her with smiles were now greeting her with smiles while holding ropes in their hands. "Owner, where are you going?"

"...I'm not going anywhere." Ning Ning said.

She walked past this group of people and back into the village.

The villagers she met along the way greeted her with smiles, the children behind her laughed noisily, the warm afternoon sun shined upon a dog, the dog sneezed, it then went to chase after a dandelion.

Everything was so peaceful and tranquil, peace and tranquility were on the surface.

But in reality?

When she walked past Ah Tie's house again, Ning Ning stopped in her tracks and looked at his kennel.

The old dog that ran away getting kicked by him had returned, it was laying inside the kennel again. It flashed its white fangs at her, there was a trace of blood on them, who knew what it hunted just now.

At night, the village chief's house.

"I heard that you wanted to leave the village today?" The village chief asked.

Ning Ning looked over and looked at him with a weird expression.

What was she looking at? The village chief looked behind him. There was no one at all, the children from that morning had all gone home as well, it was just candles that shook once behind him, the shadows on the wall also shook. At a glance, it looked like there was an extra person in the house.

"...That's right." Ning Ning's voice rang out this time, "School is about to start, why is my mom not coming to get me? If she's not going to come, I will go home myself."

"Soon, soon." The village chief looked back, he smiled at her and said, "Tomorrow is the ancestor worship ceremony, after tomorrow, you will be able to go home."

"So tonight, you must master the Nuo dance of the owner." The green-clothed young man stood behind the village chief and said with a laughter, "Let me teach you the correct way to do it."

Chapter 153

153: Ancestor Worship

Ning Ning's eyes flashed, she asked, "...Can I still trust you?"

"Of course, why would I lie to you?" The village chief frantically took an oath and said a bunch of words to placate her, but Ning Ning was not waiting for his answer.

Her vision went over his shoulders as she looked at the green-clothed young man behind him.

"Of course you can trust me." A gentle laughter rang out under the ferocious mask. "...After all, you are my only granddaughter."

Although she had long guessed it, when she heard the answer, Ning Ning still could not help but feel surprised.

"In the first place, I should have doted on you more, taught you how to walk with my own hands, brought you to look at the canola flower field on my shoulders—it's a pity I turned into a masked person too early." The green-clothed young man laughed. "...But even after I turn into a masked person, I can't let you all go."

As he finished speaking, he walked to the front of the village chief.

The village chief was still none the wiser, Ning Qing suddenly held his beard—tugging it.

"Ah!" The village chief cried out in pain. The door behind him suddenly opened, his two sons rushed in. "Dad, what happened?"

"It's fine, it's fine." The village chief pinched his own beard, then fell into a momentary daze.

Air blew on him. He didn't know if it was the wind, or if someone had breathed on him.

A small tuft of facial hair was blown at his face, it was also blown at his sons' faces. The two sons wiped their faces and thought that it was ridiculous, the village chief on the other hand had turned green.

He suddenly turned around and ran. His two sons behind him exchanged doubtful looks before frantically chasing after him, the last one to leave did not forget to lock the door.

They chased him to the living room and saw the village chief holding a fat teapot as he poured tea out.

The cup barely had a few drops of tea, the water was flowing onto the table instead, tea dripping down continuously from the corner of the table.

"Dad, what's the matter?" His elder son took the teapot out of his hand and poured the tea for him.

The village chief was helped to a seat by his other son. He received the teacup with trembling hands, took two sips and said, "There's an extra person in this house."

The two sons exchanged looks, one of them laughed. "Dad, have you been too exhausted lately?"

The village chief wiped his face, then he looked down at the few strands of white beard in his palm, murmuring, "In the house just now, as I was speaking, someone suddenly plucked a handful of my beard..."

"Ning Ning did that?" The elder son frowned. "Isn't that too much? You are her senior."

"It's not her." The village chief continued to look at his palm, saying quietly, "But if it was not her, who else could it be?"

He suddenly looked up at his two sons, his eyes sparkled in a strange manner. "It's Ning Qing."

Just as his voice faded out, a cat outside the house cried out, the three of them shuddered at the same time, under the light, each of them turned pale.

"How can it be? He has been dead for so long, hahahaha..." The younger son forced out a laughter, trying to liven up the atmosphere.

The elder son interrupted his laughter with a sentence, "What if he has turned into a masked person?"

The laughter ceased abruptly, all of them fell silent.

"...It's not possible," the village chief suddenly said, "with a doorman around, the masked people cannot come out, moreover..."

He held the hand of his younger son as he stood up, trembling. He walked slowly to the window, pushed it open and looked out.

It was late at night, but it was not quiet. At this time, the village would usually be so quiet that even the dogs would not be barking.

Today was different. Every house had their lights on, the streets were also full of people, it caused the dogs who smelt the scent of strangers to bark repeatedly. It was all because people couldn't sleep due to the excitement of the ancestor worship ceremony tomorrow.

"...Even if he were to come back here as a masked person, do we not hold the ancestor worship ceremony?" The village chief murmured, "Then he wouldn't even need to do anything, the crowd below would eat us alive..."

A night passed.

The next day, the weather was clear, there was neither wind nor cloud, it was a good day for the ancestor worship ceremony.

There were people from the door of the village chief's house, there was no space to stand on the street at all. Everyone looked excited. A mother was touching her child's head. "Don't worry. This time, you will definitely be able to be admitted into Beijing University."

A former-grand-lottery-winner-turned-poor-man was calling his ex-girlfriend, "Little Mei, if I were to win the grand lotto again, can you come back to me?"

A famous person who always appeared on television sat in the car alone. He took the time before the ancestor worship ceremony started to flip open a small book, in it was his life experiences for the past ten years. He flipped to a page and recited it.

He longed for change, longed to bounce back, longed for improvement... Countless people entrusted their hopes here, they entrusted it to what was behind the door in front of them.

The door opened with a creak.

The village chief walked out while holding his walking cane. He wore a new top with the word "bliss" sewn on and a mask of the longevity monkey. A wood-carven beard hung at the bottom of the mask, a white beard also hung below his chin. He looked at the people at the doorway slowly, suddenly turning his body sideways, revealing the mask behind him.

Fangs on all sides, ferocious and terrifying.

"Welcome, Owner!" The village chief shouted loudly.

"Welcome, Owner!" A mother held his son and shouted.

"Welcome, Owner!" The former grand lotto winner shouted.

"...She's finally here." The famous person sighed, closed the book

and got out of the car.

The mask that was hanging down slowly looked up and revealed a pair of ice cold eyes.

That pair of eyes slowly looked at its surroundings from the left to the right, looking at the fanatical faces, then let out an exclamation.

"Let's go, Owner." The village chief gestured for her to go ahead. Two masked women immediately walked up behind Ning Ning, holding her left and right hands. Ning Ning shook her shoulders and shook off their hands, she said, "I'll walk by myself."

She walked over the threshold, the golden bell on her ankle ringing, her scarlet dress dragging on the floor behind her. Step by step, she walked towards the direction of the ancestral hall like a prisoner.

The stage in front of the ancestral hall had long been ready.

The stage was empty, wood carved chairs were neatly placed in front of the stage.

The masked people were walking around in between the chairs, it looked surprisingly similar to Life Theater at a glance.

There was still some time before the play began. A group of people had arrived early at the ancestral hall to worship. Behind the ethereal white smoke were ancestral tablets, there were names on each, the village chief introduced them one by one from the side.

"This is the ancestor from my family, he was a third class official in the Qing dynasty, his daughter became a concubine in the palace."

"This is the old master of the Wu family, he was a wealthy person in the Republic era."

"This is..."

After they offered their joss sticks, the village chief led the people as they knelt down and prayed. "Ancestors, bless us. We, of the Ning Village, will never stop worshipping you. Bless us with talented people in every generation..."

Everyone prayed, Ning Ning was the only one who didn't. The crowd looked at her strangely. She looked at her surroundings and asked, "Why don't I see my ancestors?"

"It's here, it's here." The village chief led her to a corner. At a place full of dust stood a few lonely tablets. The other tablets had incense in front of them, only these few tablets had empty censers.

"What did they do?" Ning Ning asked, "Were they an official or a concubine?"

"They didn't." The village chief said, "The people of the Ning family were indifferent and not competitive, every generation had stayed in the village till old age..."

"That's strange." Ning Ning interrupted him. She looked at the ill-fitting ancestor tablets beside her. "Everyone's ancestors went out to the world before finally returning in glory, only my ancestors died in their hometown?"

"Everyone has their own ambitions." The village chief explained, "Not everyone likes to go out to the world to make a living."

Ning Ning looked at him for a moment before she blandly said, "They are all dead, you can say whatever you want."

The village chief did not react to that on the spot. He waited for Ning Ning to leave before he signaled to his elder son, saying quietly to him, "Tell Ning Yu Ren, tell her to get prepared."

The elder son said in surprise, "Ning Yu Ren? She is not qualified to be the owner at all, didn't the person from the Li family say so? She has entered Life Theater long ago, besides, her body had already shown signs of deterioration. She would most probably be going to become a masked person soon. A person like her...can't even be considered a living person, she's already half dead."

"At least she's obedient." The village chief said as he stared at Ning Ning's back. "I have a bad premonition. It would be good if nothing goes wrong, if something does go wrong...at least we have a backup."

The beat of drums and gongs, the sound of pipa and suona.

After the ancestor worship was a banquet. It had long been ready, the best table was the one Ning Ning at. She did not even need to move her chopsticks, the people by her side were fighting to give her food, they even wanted to feed her.

Ning Ning waved her hand indicating that she did not need it, she shouted at one of the people instead, smiling, "You're being so familiar with them, is it possible that your ancestor is a person from this village?"

Li Bo Yue looked back and smiled at her. "They might really be."

A group of masked children laughed as they walked past him. Upon hearing their conversation, one of them stopped, looked up and said, "You are! I heard my father say that you are of the Li family, you are

the exorcist."

The other children shouted for the child. They left the two of them and ran away.

Ning Ning stared at Li Bo Yue. Li Bo Yue shrugged. "...My dad seems to be a person from this village. He has a friend named Pei Xuan. The two of them have been researching supernatural things all this time—things about Life Theater, Life Opera House, the doorman, masked people... At the end of the research, Pei Xuan stole a mask from my dad, came back to his hometown and impersonated him."

This was when Ning Ning noticed that he was not wearing a mask.

In the midst of the masked people, he was sticking out like a sore thumb. Occasionally, someone would come over and remind him. He was so annoyed that he unwillingly took the mask out of his briefcase. He wore it askew, sticking out even more among the masked people who wore their masks properly.

"Do you believe that Life Theater exists?" Ning Ning asked.

"...Only my dad and Pei Xuan would believe in such a thing." Li Bo Yue downplayed it. "Oh, that's not right. It seems like there are quite a number of people who believe it now...including your mother."

Ning Ning looked down, her eyes sparkled.

"Don't you believe it?" She looked up and asked.

"I don't." Li Bo Yue flipped down the mask on his head, it covered his face as he mocked, "On the contrary, I want to see where the ghosts are. If they really exist, I, the ghost slayer, will take responsibility and slay them."

Ning Ning looked away. She looked at the singing and dancing villagers, thinking, "Aren't the ghosts here?"

Aren't the ghosts in the heart of these people?

"It's getting late." The village chief raised his wine cup and stood up. "Everyone drink up, then let us go to the stage together!"

"Oh!!!"

The crowd had been waiting for him to say this for a very long time. Those who were seated all stood up, finishing up the wine in their cups. Some of them put their cups down, some smashed their cups boldly. They left the leftover soup and wine behind as they walked towards the stage in front of them.

Wearing yin yang masks and holding musical instruments were the musicians for this play. They were standing and sitting around the sides of the stage.

Without masks were the patrons below the stage. One by one they were seated down, filling up all the seats. They turned their heads together.

A group of people wearing masks of various shapes and white clothes formed a long line, walked neatly by the sides of the seated people. One by one they went on stage. *Dong*. The drummer waved his hands and hit the drum with the pace of their footsteps. It sounded out like thunder—*dong, dong, dong*.

< <Life Opera House> > had begun.

Dong, dong, dong.

Ning Ning looked up at the sky, "Hey, it looks like it really is about to thunder."

The weather was so good just now. But there were rising winds and scudding clouds now, big dark clouds swept over, covering up the sky. The elder son came up to the village chief's ear and asked, "What do we do?"

The village chief looked up at the sky and shook his head. "Continue."

Thus, amidst the raging winds, the drummer continued to hit the drum. *Dong, dong, dong. Dong, dong, dong*. Accompanied by the sound of the drum, twelve dancers knelt towards Ning Ning, slowly raising their hands to the air and slowly placing their foreheads to the ground. It was as if they were begging for their lives from Heaven, seeking mercy from Earth.

"Ah—" A woman suddenly straightened her head and looked up, singing an ancient and savage song from her throat.

Accompanied by the song, the twelve dancers were about to get up from the ground, but they were stunned when they finally looked up.

Clop, clop, clop...

A pair of feet walked towards them.

A mask looked down at them.

Fangs on all sides, ferocious and terrifying.

It was Ning Ning!

The singing stopped, the dancers looked at each other, whispers were murmured among the audience. The village chief had his brows interlocked, he told his elder son that was beside him, "What's going on? They can't even keep an eye on her! Quickly get her off the stage... Wait a minute."

Ning Ning did not ruin the ancestor worship ceremony. She only stood on stage, one arm behind her back, the other hand making a gesture for the twelve dancers to come to her. She then turned around and left, not caring if they followed her or not, leaving the stage on her own and returning to her seat. She placed one hand on the cheek of her mask and continued to act again.

The elder son breathed a sigh of relief. "I'll go get someone to keep an eye on her so that she won't go anywhere."

A hand gripped his wrist firmly. He looked down and saw the village chief with his gaze fixed on stage.

"Who taught her that?" The village chief's voice held a trace of fear. "How did she know this segment of the Nuo dance?"

The elder son was taken aback for a moment, he cast his eyes on Ning Ning.

Besides him, there were a lot of people who were not paying attention to the stage, but at Ning Ning instead, especially the old villagers. The younger villagers had never seen the complete version of the Nuo dance, they had at most only heard of it through their elders... They heard that the Ning family was still in that version of the Nuo dance—the country disintegrated, the people were forced to leave their homes, the twelve surnames begged the heavens and earth to no avail, only a young man who had walked past them pitied them, asking if they wanted to follow him.

This young man called himself the owner, the owner of Life Opera House.

At first, he did not care about the lives of these people. He was just casually extending a helping hand, just like tossing a piece of wood to the ants in the water or giving a mantou² to a starving puppy.

Paying no care, just like Ning Ning at the moment.

Only appearing on stage for an instant before returning to her seat, supporting her cheek with a single hand, looking superior.

But she did not (actually) leave the 'stage'.

The masked people on stage, the masked people off stage—the

people on stage were part of the play, the people offstage were also part of the play. The outsiders didn't know that the Nuo dance titled <<Life Opera House>> actually included everyone on and off stage.

The entire village was the stage.

"Who told her to act like that?" An old man looked at Ning Ning's direction and asked quietly.

Ning Ning sat silently on the chair.

"Come." An invisible man stood beside her. He smiled and told her, told the audience, "It started with the Ning family, it will end with the Ning family... Let us end <<Life Opera House>>."

1The suona , also called laba or haidi, is a Chinese sorna (double-reeded horn). Soon as is originally from current Iran, called Surna. It appears in China around 3rd Century. It has a distinctively loud and high-pitched sound, and is used frequently in Chinese traditional music ensembles, particularly those that perform outdoors.

2Mantou, often referred to as Chinese steamed bun, is a white and soft type of steamed bread or bun popular in Northern China.

Chapter 154

154: Three Act Play

The lock hanging on the door was suddenly unlocked.

The door was opened from the outside. The village chief led a group of people, standing at the doorway and saying, "Ning Yu Ren, quickly pack up and come with us."

Ning Yu Ren—who seemed to have been sitting idly for the entire night—got up, her face was a little pale and haggard, her heart was in a flurry. They didn't lock her up for no reason, so they wouldn't have released her for no reason.

"What happened to Ning Ning?" She asked as she shivered.

The village chief looked at her with an extremely weird expression. "Did you...teach her the Nuo dance?"

Ning Yu Ren, "I didn't."

The village chief looked towards Cui Hong Mei who was on the bed. "How about you?"

The only thing that answered him were snores.

The village chief shot a look at the two people behind him, they rushed up to Cui Hong Mei and shook her awake.

"Who is it? Who are you people, causing a din early in the morning...? Ah, Village Chief." Although Cui Hong Mei was usually unreasonable, but whenever she saw the village chief, she would act like a mouse that had seen a cat. She tumbled off the bed. Hearing him repeat his question, she smiled embarrassingly. "I...I wanted to teach her, but I need to have known it first."

She was usually lazy, she had already forgotten how to perform the Nuo dance of her family, how could she remember how to perform the Nuo dance of another family?

After getting the answer, the village chief's expression became even weirder.

"Village Chief, what exactly happened?" Ning Yu Ren's heart was full of uneasiness. "Did something go wrong when Ning Ning was performing?"

"Go wrong..." The village chief huffed and puffed. "She poured a bowl of wine on the face of a dancer."

Ning Yu Ren turned pale with fright, she said with anger and worries, "...I've been doting on her too much. She's out of control, completely out of control. Village Chief, let me meet her, I will definitely have to give her a scolding, then have her apologise to all the uncles and aunties."

The village chief stared at her for half an instant before he sighed. "Sure enough, you have forgotten as well."

Ning Yu Ren was stunned.

"Actually, it's not just you. I have forgotten as well... It has been a long while after all." The village chief said slowly, "Yu Ren, <<Life Opera House>> is a three-act play, do still you remember what the first act is about?"

"I remember." Ning Yu Ren recalled for a moment. "The first act is <<Meeting God>>. The villagers begged for their lives from Heaven, sought mercy from Earth, but neither Heaven nor Earth answered them, the people could only bring their children and flee. They finished all their food and water, they were at the end of their road when they saw an opera house. A young man was sitting on top of it, looking down at them, then..."

"Then, that young man tilted the wine cup down, he poured wine at the hungry and thirsty refugees at the foot of the opera house." The village chief continued for her, saying in a deep voice, "So, Ning Ning did not do anything wrong. The first act did have this segment: Pouring Wine to Quench Thirst."

"But...how did she know?" Ning Yu Ren murmured.

"That's right, how did she know?" The village chief stared at her. "Ever since your father died, no one performed the role of the owner for several decades. After that much time has passed, there are many things—many details—that have been forgotten by everyone. Yet, the things that everyone has forgotten, you and me have forgotten, how could she have known?"

Ning Yu Ren had no words.

She indistinctly had an answer, but did not intend to tell him.

There was no need to tell him either, because the village chief had a guess of his own. Otherwise, his expression would not have been this pale, his hands would not have been trembling so much.

"...Let's go." The village chief paused before he told Ning Yu Ren, "Come to the ancestral hall with me, you will perform in her stead."

A line of people walked in a flurry towards the ancestral hall. Along the way, the sound of the drum got closer, louder—with every beat of the drum, the look on the village chief's face got worse.

"Then?" Ning Yu Ren walked along his side, she asked as she sized up his expression. "What did Ning Ning do during the second act?"

His expression turned even worse as expected.

"...She ran up to the stage," the village chief's cheek twitched, "and chased everyone off it."

"She didn't leave a single one?"

"She didn't leave a single one."

"Even the sacrificial offerings were chased off the stage?"

"Even the sacrificial offerings were chased off the stage."

Ning Yu Ren started laughing. "No wonder you frantically came looking for me. If even the sacrificial offerings for the owner were chased off the stage, how would they continue with <<Human Sacrifice>>?"

The second act, <<Human Sacrifice>>.

The villagers took out everything they had and wanted to give it to the god in front of them—but the god did not want any of those grass, tree branches, leather, vegetables or leaves they wanted to give him at all. Or it could have been that he thought it was too troublesome, he didn't want to be burdened with such stuff, so he threw all of the offerings away impolitely.

The villagers felt disheartened. In the end, they thought over it and offered up another sacrifice on the next day.

This time they offered the healthiest and most beautiful teenager.

It was...a human sacrifice.

God was moved by this person, thus he agreed to bring this group of villagers to flee with him, to look for a new utopia with him. While they were fleeing, he showed a magical ability—he had a tiny box, there was a model of an opera house inside, it could change its size, it could let people go back to the past, it could change their lives. The people called it 'Life Opera House', they addressed the god as 'Owner'.

"The good daughter you have taught." The cheek on the village

chief twitched even more. "When I tried to tell her off, she turned on me and reprimanded me, saying that the pretty young man is not pretty enough, she wanted us to pick a new offering for her..."

"Then offer her another one." If not for the inappropriate setting, Ning Yu Ren would have laughed out loud. She mocked, "Didn't a lot of people return to the village this time? There are quite a few young and pretty boys right?"

"...We did! She did not pick any of them!" What Ning Yu Ren could think of, the village chief could definitely think of. Not only did he think of it, he had even done it—it was just that the outcome was not as expected. He said with a face full of rage, "In the end, we were forced to...return that man back to her."

Him using the word 'return', Ning Yu Ren could only think of one person.

"Are you talking about Pei Xuan?" She asked.

The village chief looked at her up and down for a moment, then let out a cold laughter. "So he's called Pei Xuan, you really do know each other."

After pausing for a moment, he looked at Ning Yu Ren doubtfully. "Don't tell me that you're the one who got him to impersonate someone from the Li family and sneak into the village? What else are you hiding from us?"

"Then what else are you people hiding from us?" Ning Yu Ren laughed. "Didn't you say that he had already left the village and was getting his wounds treated at a hospital?"

They were equally bad, neither were telling the truth, neither were trustworthy.

"...This fellow knows so many secrets of our village, how can we let him go?" The village chief said with apathy, "He should still be of some use, like to appease that obstinate daughter of yours."

Obstinate, wilful and reckless—what was most unbearable to the village chief was that the ancestor worship ceremony that was supposed to be completely under control, had gradually shifted into the hands of Ning Ning.

That was simply a disgrace.

It reminded him of her equally disobedient grandfather.

Rather than let history repeat itself, he would prefer to give up on

Ning Ning. He would pick the more obedient Ning Yu Ren instead.

"...We'll let her perform up to the second act." The village chief stopped in his tracks, there was a hubbub of voices in front of him, the stage was right in front. "For the last act, you will perform."

Ning Yu Ren laughed without saying a word.

She was very clear why the village chief would choose her. It was not because she had better acting skills, it was not because she was more suitable for the role of owner compared to Ning Ning, it was only because she was more obedient.

"...I will perform according to your wishes," she laughed, "but I have to remind you of something."

"Remind me of what?"

"If something were to happen to me at the end." Ning Yu Ren looked at the stage that was not far from her, looking at Ning Ning who was on the stage, smiling gently, "...Then she will be the only remaining member of the Ning family."

You would have to protect her, you would not be able to hurt her, because if she lived, then you would be able to hold the next ancestor worship ceremony, the next < <Life Opera House> > .

"Substitute!!" The village chief shouted at the stage.

The audience had been waiting for him to say the word for a very long time. They dragged Ning Ning off the stage, a few strong middle-aged woman tore the clothes and accessories off Ning Ning. Ning Ning cut a slightly sorry figure, she looked over with her dishevelled hair. She saw that they had already run over to Mama's side, putting everything on her in a flurry, the last item being the mask.

Fangs on all sides, ferocious and terrifying.

Ning Yu Ren's face was covered behind the mask, a pair of gentle eyes quietly looked at her from afar.

"Act three, < <Exorcism> >!"

The village chief shouted out, Ning Yu Ren stepped on stage.

Her gaze shifted from the twelve dancers to the extra person who had shown up.

That person was slender, he was dressed in green with a mask on his face.

Fangs on all sides, ferocious and terrifying.

His face was covered behind the mask, a pair of gentle eyes quietly gazing at her from afar.

"You don't really trust me," Ning Qing touched the mask on his face, "because I am a masked person."

The dancers started to dance, surrounding the two of them.

"I don't blame you, because most of the masked people are certainly as you imagined. Due to the fact that they had been locked in the movie theater for a very long time, their mindset and methods are all a little twisted—what if I'm like them? What if for the sake of reuniting our family, I trick all of you into entering the movie theater to become masked people?" Ning Qing laughed. He reached his hand out to Ning Yu Ren's face, but Ning Yu Ren took a step back. His hand froze and was slowly retracted.

Upon seeing this, Ning Yu Ren suddenly felt a little regret.

She indeed did not believe a masked person, because she had seen every masked person getting twisted from their pain. Moreover, Ning Qing had just tricked Ning Ning into a well a few days ago, they had a big fight because of this...

"...If you don't trust me, at least trust Ning Ning." Ning Qing looked back in Ning Ning's direction. "She had finally gotten to this stage, you should let her finish it."

Ning Yu Ren looked at Ning Ning.

What she did not manage to do, Ning Ning had managed to. Not only had she rescued her, she had even rescued Pei Xuan. What was next? Would she be able to end this Nuo dance, to leave together with them, to go home together?

...But could she take this risk? Could she trust a masked person? There was something fishy with this Nuo dance. No one knew what would happen if they were to finish it, could she let Ning Ning take this risk?

Under the watchful eyes of everyone, Ning Yu Ren closed her eyes. After half an instant, she slowly opened her eyes and finally made her decision, "I..."

Chapter 155

155: Exorcism

"I still can't trust you."

The dancers on stage had stopped. There had been too many accidents that day, they thought that everything would return to normal after they had a substitute. Ning Yu Ren started to talk to herself at last.

"If you did not want us to take part in the Nuo dance, you could have told us directly," Ning Yu Ren said, "but you didn't say anything, you led us into the village instead."

Ning Ning was not the only one who could see masked people, Ning Yu Ren could do so too.

The day they had arrived at the village, when the car broke down at the road, when they were arguing about whether to carry on or go back, Ning Qing had appeared. He could have warned them, or he could have turned back and told them to stop—when they were following him—to leave the village...

But he did not say any of those things.

He led them to the village step by step.

"You wanted us to take part in the Nuo dance, is the candidate Ning Ning? Or me? " Ning Yu Ren fell silent for a moment, she got the answer. "...It's Ning Ning."

"Who are you talking to?" A dancer asked her. Although the others didn't say anything, they were looking around, they were so nervous that their limbs were stiff, they were having goosebumps.

It was not only them, the audience also started to talk among themselves restlessly. Some deliberately talked in loud voices, as if doing so would dispel the fear in their hearts.

Ning Yu Ren did not answer the question, she was still looking at Ning Qing. "Later on, I had the chance to substitute for Ning Ning, the village chief even agreed, but you didn't... When we found her in the well, your mask was on her body."

When Ning Ning was found, she was already exhausted, she was so

weak that she could not even open her eyes. Ning Yu Ren had wanted to use her condition as an excuse to borrow a car to send her to a hospital in the county, but because of the mask, she could not go anywhere.

The mask that had been lost for decades, the Ning family member that had been missing for decades, the villagers feared losing either of them.

Even if they had to force her, they had to get her to stay.

"This is fate." The village chief had even prepared an excuse for his and his people's actions. "Some people's lives are destined. For example, Ning Ning's—the moment we held the ancestor worship ceremony, she returned; the mask that had been lost for so long, she found it the moment she came back; what is this if not fate? She was destined to come back and be the owner since she was born."

"What a joke." Ning Yu Ren held Ning Ning tightly, just like a mother holding her newborn, her seemingly powerless infant. "The daughter that I was pregnant with for ten months before giving birth to, I've borne bitter hardships to raise her. Just by saying 'It's her destiny', you want to take her away from me..."

"Let go!"

"No!"

The villagers rushed up and tore Ning Ning away from her. They locked her and Cui Hong Mei up in an attic together afterwards.

Her phone had been confiscated while they were on the way, her voice could not be heard from the outside, she could not hear anything from the outside either. Days felt like years, she sat idly until one day the door was finally opened again, the one who had stood at the doorway was the village chief, but he was not the reason she was let out early.

"...Is it Ning Qing?" One of the dancers swallowed, he said as he was trembling a little, "Are...you talking to Ning Qing?"

It would have been fine if he didn't say that. The moment he said that, the number of people on stage was cut by half, the remaining half had all retreated to the edges of the stage, their eyes were wandering around, any movement on stage and they would immediately turn around and jump off.

"Ning Yu Ren, stop playing tricks!" The village chief rushed over with his cane, he said in exasperation, "You think I don't know what

you're doing? You're acting!"

After he finished, he waved his cane. The dancers that had jumped off the stage had all rushed back up. "Get up here! All of you get up here! You're all adults, how can you get tricked so easily! She is an actress, acting is like breathing to her. There is no Ning Qing here at all, he has already rotted down to his bones..."

Before he could finish, pain suddenly shot up his chin.

"Ah!" The village chief reached up and touched his chin. He realised that he had lost a big handful of his beard, it was like that night again. An invisible hand let go (of his beard) in front of him, white facial hair floated to the ground, forming a layer of snow.

Something that could be seen with a naked eye like this was more convincing than any words.

With the village chief as the center, his surroundings immediately emptied out in a circle, everyone looked at him like a bird that was scared off by the twang of a bow.

The village chief's back broke out in cold sweat. He slowly looked up at Ning Yu Ren, but found that Ning Yu Ren was looking behind him, saying, "Ning Ning, did you see everything? Hear everything?"

Everything she said was not an act for the villagers, it was also not to scare the village chief so he would stop the ancestor worship ceremony—she did it so Ning Ning could hear everything, so that Ning Ning would not be in the dark.

"Admittedly, you cannot trust the villagers, but him..." Ning Yu Ren looked at Ning Qing. "You can't trust him easily either. He is your grandfather, but he is also a masked person."

Ning Qing did not rebuke at all. At this moment, all he did was to smile at her, then he continued walking towards Ning Ning.

"Even if you are family, after you become a masked person, you will become untrustworthy." Ning Yu Ren's voice followed behind him, it was bitter and helpless. "He might not want to harm you, he thinks that what he's doing is good for you—but the 'good', is not what you would want sometime..."

Ning Qing stopped in front of Ning Ning.

"See, I told you." He looked down at her and sighed. "No matter what I say, no matter what I do, she will still doubt me...because I am a masked person. This is also the reason why I could not look for her and could only look for you."

Ning Ning held Wen Yu in her arms as she looked at him with a complicated expression.

Ning Qing had told her that Ning Yu Ren would have such a reaction, she had not believed it. Even after he had become a masked person, family would still be family, but who knew...

But she couldn't blame Ning Yu Ren for having that kind of mindset.

After the doorman disappeared, what did the group of masked people who had escaped from Life Theater do?

Stalking, sneaking, surveilling, monopoly—all those had become ordinary fare, they even committed murder, implicating their lovers, making them suffer anxiety and even putting them at risk to get imprisoned. Didn't Wen Yu come to the theater to seek answers because of that?

Just as Ning Yu Ren had said, masked people did not want to harm people. Their stalking, surveilling, attempts to monopolise—were usually targeted at the people they loved the most. It was just that they didn't think, or maybe they deliberately ignored whether the other party would be able to accept them once again, whether they would be able to ignore the looks of passersby to live together with aliens like them in the mortal realm.

"What are you thinking of?" Ning Qing suddenly asked.

Behind him, the drums sounded out again, the dancers on stage suddenly sprang up on their feet. They jumped at the audience like beasts, inciting screams.

Act three, < <Exorcism> >.

The village had been built up, life was getting better and better, the refugees got married and had children on this new piece of land. They started their new lives, but everything seemed to be unrelated to the people in the opera house.

Not every masked person was able to accept the current situation, not every masked person was able to live with their decisions. Some regretted it, some tried to escape the opera house to return to the side of their loved ones.

"I think that...you're a little different from other masked people." Ning Ning said as she looked at Ning Qing. "You know, all the masked people—I'm talking about all the masked people who have escaped from Life Theater—they returned to the side of the people they miss

the most..."

Masked people were not selfless, Ning Qing had admitted that as well.

"...For this point, I'm no different from the other masked people." He laughed. "I also have a person whom I want to meet."

"Where is that person?" Ning Ning asked.

"Right here." Ning Qing answered.

Among the audience, every masked person found their loved ones, one of them held the hand of the other party and refused to let go. A hand suddenly reached out and grabbed his shoulder, forcefully slamming him onto the ground.

A snow white mask.

It was the exorcist.

He held a whip and whipped the masked person casually. The masked person writhed on the ground after getting whipped, but he refused to give up. He reached out to grab the ankle of his loved one, attempting to get some empathy and consolation from the other party.

That seemed to have angered the exorcist. He rolled up his whip and walked over, ripping off the mask of the other party with one fell swoop. The other party covered his face with both hands. The moment his face saw the light of day, it was as if the face under the fingers was getting burnt by the sun. With silent, mournful wails, he fell to the floor, trembling violently a couple of times before he stopped moving.

The exorcist stood beside him while holding the mask.

Nearby, the masked people bent down. They surrounded him like spirits, some cried, some shouted, some begged, some cursed.

"Who are you referring to?" Ning Ning asked.

Ning Qing shook his head. "There's no time, are you ready?"

Behind the exorcist, a figure sneaked onto the stage, it was the man who was portraying the sacrifice. Ning Yu Ren walked up to greet him, gently bringing him into her arms. A moment later, she reached out and pushed him away, stumbling backwards as she looked at the bloody dagger in his hand, she then looked down at her bleeding abdomen.

"If you don't die, families will be separated." The sacrifice said, "So I'll kill you, like I'm exorcising a demon."

Exorcism—the demon in the heart.

To send relatives and friends, husbands and children into the opera house, then to not ever let them out anymore. With enough time, they would turn into masked people, the illness in the hearts of the villagers, the demon in their hearts.

The exorcist returned to the stage while holding a handful of masks which then fell to the floor. He squatted down, picking up Ning Yu Ren from the ground. After half a moment, he picked up the dagger beside her. "I'm sorry, I fell into their trap, I should not have left your side."

After he finished, he held the dagger horizontally, then fell on top of her.

Exorcism—the strongest demon.

As the doorman of the opera house, as the nemesis of all the masked people, the only thing that could kill him was himself.

Clap.

Clap, clap.

Clap, clap, clap!!

Applause sounded out like a wave, the audience stood up one by one, their mouths murmuring repeatedly, "Appear, appear..."

The applause continued for a long time until it gradually turned sparse. Looking at the empty stage, looking at Ning Yu Ren and the exorcist who was getting up from the floor, the audience exchanged looks. They finally looked towards the village chief in rage. "What's going on! Why did it not appear!?!"

Chapter 156

156: Act Four

"How much did we donate to the village every year, huh? We don't need you to do anything else, we only need you to do one thing, yet you can't even do the one thing? Return my hard-earned money!"

"One month! I spent a whole month here! Give me an explanation!"

"That's right, give us an explanation!"

Feelings were running high, the audience seemed to want to tear the village chief apart, each one of them had the same question—where was the opera house?

"Calm down! Everyone, calm down!" The village chief slammed down forcefully with his cane. Relying on his remaining influence, he finally calmed down the emotions of the audience temporarily. He turned around to look at Ning Yu Ren and said, "Try again."

Ning Yu Ren tried again under his orders, but the result was the same—nothing appeared, nothing happened.

The crowd erupted again, this time more raucous than before. Not only did they start to hurl abuse at the village chief, even Ning Yu Ren and the other performers were also dragged into it.

"If she can't do it, then get someone else to do it!" One of the people pointed to the front and said, "Swap her in and try!"

Ning Ning who was being pointed at looked up.

A finger pointed at her, countless legs ran towards her, they did not care if she was willing, they dragged her out from behind the table in a flurry and pulled her towards the stage. One of them remembered the strange incident that had happened on stage, they looked left and right before saying anxiously, "Everyone, slow down, slow down. What if we annoyed Ning Qing? I feel that he is watching us nearby..."

Someone said with disdain, "When he was alive, we were not afraid of him, now that he's dead, should we be afraid of him?"

Ning Ning was pushed on stage.

A few middle-aged women took off the coat and mask from Ning Yu Ren and put them on Ning Ning again.

Ning Yu Ren rushed over. She attempted to tear the clothes off Ning Ning, but was forcefully pushed away. She took a few steps back, saying to the village chief as she trembled with anger, "Didn't we previously agree to let me dance in her stead?"

"You can see it yourself." The village chief glanced at the audience that had lost their heads, sighing. "It doesn't matter what we say now, what matters is what they say."

The influence that the village chief and other masked people had was based on successfully performing < Life Opera House > .

Ning Ning's accidents, Ning Yu Ren mentioning Ning QIng—both had already caused a big impact on their influence, the straw that broke the camel's back was the failure of the performance.

After that, this group of people was out of control, just like their ancestors who had gone out of control.

Ning Ning looked at them. "What exactly do you want me to do?"

"We want to go to Life Opera House!" Countless voices answered together.

"Then go," Ning Ning laughed innocently, "no one is stopping you."

"But where is it?" A woman asked as she held her child tightly. "I cannot find it, I only know that it seems to have changed its name, it's called 'Life Theater' now."

"I, on the other hand, know the address, but what's the use?" The former grand lottery winner—who had lost all his money and became a pauper—laughed, his laughter was a little neurotic. "The place is a commercial street, there is a boba tea shop and a car repair shop by the side, but there is no movie theater..."

"...That's right! I've been there too, I can't even see the entrance, we don't have to talk about going in."

"What? Why have I never heard you people say that before! Tell me the address, I'll go try it out!"

"The address is 35 Rouge Street at N City," Ning Ning abruptly told them the address, "if you want to give it a shot, you can try now."

The entire place fell silent. After a while, someone mumbled from within the crowd, "Who knows if what you're saying is true?"

There were people who hesitated, there were people who were completely indifferent, there were people who sneered, but at last, the woman who spoke first sighed. She held her child's hand and walked

out from the crowd.

"You really believe what she said?" Someone shouted from behind.

The woman stopped in her tracks, she looked back with a complicated expression. "...I am also the mother of a child."

They looked apologetically at Ning Yu Ren who had been desperately fighting, then left with her child in hand. Not a while later, the sound of a car starting up rang out from a distance. The car ferried mother and son out of the village. With her leading the way, three more people walked out of the crowd, one of them turned back halfway through, in the end only three cars left the village.

"Who else? Who?" The former grand lottery winner looked around, finally viciously smiling and staring at Ning Ning. "Alright, there's no one else, you can begin now."

Ning Ning smiled and looked at the exorcist. "Let us begin."

The exorcist looked at her with a strange expression. Ning Ning recognised his eyes, she also recognised his stature—he was Li Bo Yue—what was this fellow doing? Why did he take part in the village's Nuo dance? That's not right, the mask on his face was the one Wen Yu had brought. Why was that mask on his face? Why did the villagers allow him to perform as such an important character?

Li family? Li family...could he actually be the descendant of someone who had left the village? The descendant of the exorcist?

"What are you staring blankly for? It's about to storm, I'm putting it out there, even if it storms, we will not leave, you have to finish the dance... No, succeed in the dance!" The former grand lottery winner urged.

...Now was not the time to think about that. Ning Ning temporarily forgot her doubts and performed the third act, < <Exorcism> >, with Li Bo Yue.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

When Ning Ning finished < <Exorcism> > for the third time, the expectation and excitement had long disappeared from the faces of the audience, all that was left was ice-cold rage.

"That's impossible!" The former grand lottery winner was the first one to lash out from the audience seats. He threw his coke bottle on

the ground and stamped the ground a few times, then he held his head and said, "Where exactly did it go wrong? Where exactly did it go wrong...? That's right, that's right..."

He slowly looked up, a pair of bloodshot eyes staring at Ning Ning, laughing in a sinister manner. "You have to die."

"What nonsense are you talking about?" Ning Yu Ren said coldly.

"Am I wrong?" He looked at Ning Yu Ren with a weird smile on his face. "Every time the Nuo dance ends, a person from the Ning family would die. It was true for you father, it was true for your grandfather, it was true for every generation."

Ning Yu Ren did not believe it, but she looked at her surroundings and found that, within everyone's eyes, seemed to be written that they believed it.

"...Then now it's my turn." Ning Yu Ren laughed out loud a few times before she coldly said, "Which one of you wants to do it?"

The crowd looked at each other, their vision finally fell upon the village chief.

"You?" Ning Yu Ren said as she slowly walked up the stage. She stood in front of Ning Ning like a mother hen protecting its chick, looking down at them coldly. "All of you should know that I am not my father, neither am I my grandfather—I have not lived in the village all my life, there is no one in the outside world who doesn't know me... I am the movie empress, Ning Yu Ren."

She stated her identity and looked at the onlookers. "Which one of you dares to kill me?!!"

After a moment of silence, the village chief broke the silence. "We didn't even say that we want to kill you..."

"Killing my daughter would mean killing me!!" Ning Yu Ren shouted loudly.

The former grand lottery winner abruptly stood up, his eyes held a sinister light in them. "I'll do it!!"

The crowd looked at him in astonishment, Ning Yu Ren, too, looked at him in astonishment. After half an instant, she screamed, "You dare?! If you were to touch one finger on her, I will take revenge on you even if I have to go bankrupt!!"

"...If I don't go into Life Opera House today, you wouldn't even have to be the one to do it." The former grand lottery winner breathed

heavily, his hand that was in his pocket grasping a few lottery tickets. "I borrowed money to buy lottery tickets, none of them were winners, heh heh... The credit company is already looking for me all over the world, I have nowhere else to go anymore..."

His bloodshot eyes were staring at Ning Ning, they were avaricious and entreating. "You are my last chance."

Upon finishing his words, he walked towards Ning Ning. Ning Yu Ren rushed at him at the same time. The two of them started fighting, but Ning Yu Ren was no match for such a desperado, she was tossed to the ground not soon after. He stomped on her repeatedly, one of them landing on her face—the face loved by thousands was stained with mud, blood flowing out from her nose...

"Ning Ning, don't lose your temper." Ning Qing's voice rang out, "Do you still remember what I told you? You cannot get angry. The moment you get angry, it's all over for you... Now, you have to make them mad."

Her shoulders trembled slightly. Under the mask, Ning Ning took deep breaths, the hot air she breathed out hit the mask's interior and rebounded back to her eyes.

"Enough." She told the former grand lottery winner blandly, "You said that every time after the Nuo dance ends, one person from the Ning family will die, but the Nuo dance has yet to end. If I die, or if my mother dies, this Nuo dance would never reach its conclusion."

The leg that was about to stomp on Ning Yu Ren slowly retracted. The former grand lottery winner stared at her for a very long time. "You said that this Nuo dance has yet to end?"

"That's right." Ning Ning laughed. "Aren't we missing the fourth act?"

The former grand lottery winner was stunned, he looked at the village chief. "There's a fourth act?"

The crowd started to whisper to one another, "Didn't they say it is only a three-act performance?"

"That's what I heard too."

"Since the first three acts didn't succeed...maybe there really is a fourth act?"

"Listen to her spouting nonsense." The village chief faced a mountain of inquiring eyes. He shook his head and said, "There have always only been three acts throughout history, where did the fourth

act come from?"

"Was there a situation like this in the past? After the three acts were done, not even the shadow of Life Opera House could be seen." Ning Ning asked.

What she said made sense as well, thus the whispers grew louder.

"A three-act play is a three-act play, the rules are rules. Since it was passed down like this from our ancestors, there definitely would be a reason for it, how can we just change it on a whim? Adding an act on a whim?" The village chief had a horrible suspicion, he quickly brought up the rules to intimidate them, but his influence had been greatly reduced. It was still fine with the villagers, but why would the outsiders who returned home in glory be willing to listen to him?

"Village Chief, you should just say less." Ning Ning turned and looked at him. "It's all just bullshit anyway, no one wants to listen to it."

The village chief flew off the handle, he used his cane to tap the ground forcefully. Seeing that no one paid any heed to him, he used even more force to tap the ground with his cane. The sound it made was getting louder and louder, it sounded more and more anxious, but the crowd only shot a glance at him coldly before they looked back to continue their discussion. It was just as Ning Ning said, they completely didn't take him seriously, they treated him like crap, they treated his words like bullshit, no one wanted to listen to him.

The village chief trembled with anger, he raised his cane and pointed at them. "You! You will regret it! You will all regret it!!"

...Ning Ning did not know whether she was imagining it, but when he shouted out in rage, the mask on her face seemed to have gotten warmer.

"Haha, let's continue," Ning Ning said by her ear, "make them even angrier..."

The crowd had formed a conclusion from their discussion. The former grand lottery winner looked at Ning Ning and licked his lips. "What did you say the fourth act is?"

"<<Owner>>." Ning Ning turned around and took a few steps forward. "The title of the fourth act...is <<Owner>>."

Chapter 157

157: The Opera House within the Fog

"The fourth act?" The village chief laughed. "There has never been a fourth act."

Was that really the case?

"Ever since I was born, the villagers have been acting in front of me," Ning Qing said by Ning Ning's ear, "they don't really like me or respect me, it was all just a facade..."

After a pause, he let out a deep laughter. "They raised me up high, so that later on I will fall further down."

The fourth act existed, it had always existed.

The three other acts were done on stage, but only the fourth act was done in reality. Day and night, acting continuously, the actors were the Ning family, it was everyone in the village.

But what was it for?

Creating such a tragicomedy onscreen was for the sake of gaining the pity and tears of the audience, but what good would it be for them to do such a thing?

"Can you imagine? Everything around me was fake. The grandmother who sent me food everyday, the playmates who grew up with me, the village chief who raised me in my father's stead... All of them suddenly changed during the ancestor worship ceremony. They hit me, scolded me and humiliated me. They even justified it, they said that they had fed me and raised me, pretended to treat me well, just for the sake of feeling less guilt when they had to do me in at the end of it." Ning Qing mocked himself. "So how can there not be a fourth act? This is the fourth act, the act the villagers put up in front of me."

Or one could say, the act they put up in front of us.

Behind the mask, Ning Ning's eyes scanned across every face which was filled with desire.

If it wasn't because grandmother had brought Mama out of the village with her to remarry an outsider on a whim, they might have

continued with act four—generations upon generations, repeating the same scenario, ending up with the same outcome.

"There wasn't even enmity between us, why did they have to do that? Spending two decades, just for the sake of making fun of me? No, even if there were two people who were willing to spend that kind of time and effort, not everyone would be willing to do so, there must be some sort of reason for the villagers and outsiders to persevere." Ning Qing laughed eerily. "After thinking about it thoroughly, there can only be one reason..."

It was deliberate.

They deliberately wanted to deal a blow to Ning Qing—to make him feel stupefied, to make him feel like his life was a joke, to make him fly into a rage.

The three-act performance of the ancestor worship ceremony was completely a smokescreen, it was for the sake of covering up the fourth act, covering up the real reason.

To offer the preposterous fourth act—to offer the protagonist whose life had been played with to Life Theater.

"What are you doing?" The former grand lottery winner shouted out. After a dreary thunder rumbled, it finally started to rain, he wiped off the rain from his face as he impatiently urged, "Begin quickly!"

Rain washed over Ning Ning's body, washing over the darkness around her along with the white mask on her face.

"Don't rush," she said slowly, "decide now, which three of you will be going in later?"

The former grand lottery winner was surprised. He asked, "What do you mean three of us?"

"Life Theater will begin screening every day at exactly twelve at night. The film that will be screened is chosen at random, no one knows what movie will be screening tonight, all I know is..." Ning Ning looked around at the audience, "that only three among you could enter."

The crowd immediately erupted in an uproar. The former grand lottery winner immediately rebuked, "Nonsense! How could only three enter?"

"Because from me, you could only get three tickets at most." Her eyes from behind the mask shot a glance at the village chief. "Isn't the

ancestor worship ceremony every year for the sake of this? Torturing a person, it does not matter if they are surnamed Ning, as long as the person is in pain and despair, Life Theater would send that person three tickets in succession. And, only ones with a ticket could enter Life Theater."

This was what Ning Ning understood from this ancestor worship ceremony.

Otherwise, why would this village torment a person like that? From the cautionary tale of Pei Xuan's matter, Ning Ning's first instinct was that they wanted to fish for tickets.

"There's no such thing." The village chief rebuked, he spoke firmly and righteously, "All of my ancestors have lived in this village, they had hosted the ancestor worship ceremony, I have never heard of what you just said. You just focus on opening the movie theater and let everyone here enter."

Ning Ning stared at him for a while.

That was strange, he didn't look like he was lying.

"I have also never heard of what you said." Ning Ning said slowly, she was equally firm and resolute, because she was not lying either, "You've seen the current situation. Using your method, there is not even a shadow of the movie theater, you can only use my method now."

"How can you not know?" The village chief roared, then he was astonished, his voice weakened slightly, "How can you not know..."

Why would she know?

Ning Ning grew up outside the village, she had never acted in the fourth act.

What was used on Ning Qing could not be used on her, one could say that the situation had been completely reversed. The villagers were the ones who had acted for the Ning family in the past, now it was Ning Ning who was acting for them, to let them feel stupefied, to feel the pain and incandescent rage.

An angry man pushed the village chief to the ground. The bystanders hurried over and held him back. The man struggled as he roared, "Give me an explanation! Every year, you ask for money from me. Every year, I give you so much money. What did I get in the end?"

In the rain, the village chief sat on mud without saying a word.

"That's right, give me an explanation."

"I don't want an explanation, where's the ticket? Give me the ticket?"

"What kind of seniority do you have? Be it first come first serve or who has more seniority, it wouldn't even be your turn."

"Wait a minute. Everyone, wait a minute, we haven't even seen the ticket, let's not fight among ourselves! Be careful not to get tricked!"

"Speaking of which, who could prove that we can only enter with a ticket?"

"I can prove it."

The chaos and noise suddenly stopped, the entire crowd looked over, their eyes fixed on Ning Yu Ren.

"I can prove it." Ning Yu Ren repeated herself, then slowly walked to Ning Ning's side. She turned back and told the crowd, "Most of the people here might not know each other, but all of you know who I am."

That was not a boast, she was just stating a fact.

As a generational movie empress—furthermore, she was the currently popular movie empress who had yet to retire from show business—she would be present at any place with a television. Even people who didn't watch television would also hear about her from the people around them.

"I made my debut very late in my career, I also got popular very late in my career, but I was seemingly an overnight hit, don't you all find it strange? How could anyone change so much in the span of one night?" Ning Yu Ren answered her own question, "Because like some of you here, like some of your elders, I have also been to Life Theater. Moreover, I have entered it more than once."

Just as Ning Yu Ren had said, one could infer that among the people who had returned to the village from the outside world—some of them were getting on their years, some of them were still young—they might have actually been to Life Theater, but most of them probably had never been as the ancestor worship ceremony had not been held for a very long time. However, a certain direct relative of theirs might have been into the theater, which caused them to be affected by the legacy that was left behind.

"The reason the village chief didn't pick me, the reason why I could not be the owner is also very simple." Ning Yu Ren mocked herself.

"You could get three tickets from Ning Ning, but as for me, you could probably only get one ticket...adding up to a total of four tickets. Although it cannot satisfy everyone, at least four of you can enter, right? We have tickets, we know where the movie theater is, we can bring you there."

Ning Yu Ren spoke from personal experience. Some of the crowd believed it, some didn't, however, there was also someone who impulsively said, "Why go through all that trouble? Do as I say, just kill her..."

"What if we kill her and the movie theater still doesn't appear?"

"Whoever suggested it should do it. Anyway, I won't be the one to do it, I don't want to become a criminal and be on the run without going into the movie theater."

"Why are you all looking at me? Don't count on me to do it! You don't want to become a fugitive, do you think I want to?"

If there were no other choice, someone would have taken the risk.

But now that there was a choice, furthermore, there were three choices—after all, there would be three tickets, wouldn't there?

A ray of hope was in front of them, who amongst them would be willing to become a murderer under the watchful eyes of the crowd? Everyone would share the benefits, but the person alone would have to bear the consequences. Thus, before the ticket had even appeared, each of them had already started fighting among themselves as their faces started to flush warmly.

"Stop, everyone stop." The village chief had been seated on the ground, his two sons helped him up from each side. He stood up with difficulty and started reprimanding them, but not a single person was willing to listen to him. He turned around and told the locals, "Stop watching, quickly go and stop them."

One of them took a few steps forward, but upon seeing that the people around them did not move, they retreated back.

"Village Chief, just forget it." One of them spoke out of kindness, "They are the rich people of the village, why should we offend them?"

The village chief looked at them silently. Where did the unquestionable power his ancestors told him about come from? It came from the ancestor worship ceremony, it came from the Life Theater that would appear during the ancestor worship ceremony. However, when the theater didn't appear, this power would also

crumble.

The villagers looked at the old fogey with pity, one of them started speaking hesitantly, "Village Chief, both of us will definitely die in this village in our old age, but the others, they have children who want to leave the village, they want to carve a path for themselves outside, they can only rely on these rich people, right?"

They changed, they had changed. The village chief looked at them, feeling a wave of desolation and despair in his heart. He shook his head and said, "How can you believe her and not me? They are swindlers, both mother and daughter are swindlers. There is no fourth act at all, there is also no such thing as tickets—Ticket..."

A piece of ticket floated down in front of him.

His eyes followed the ticket to the ground. He watched it gently float to the ground, floating on a small puddle.

A thin yellow paper. On the left was a round stamp, within the stamp was the phrase 'Admission Ticket'. On the right was a rectangular frame, within the frame was the phrase 'Life Theater'.

The world fell silent in an instant, the sound of people, rain, they had all disappeared.

The village chief looked down and fixed his eyes on that ticket, murmuring, "Impossible, impossible..."

"Look," a devil-like voice rang out behind him, it was Ning Ning, "that is a Life Theater ticket."

He looked back. He glared at her and was about to rebuke her, but a person pounced him, then a second one, a third one...

"Don't snatch! I got it first!"

"Hey, are we queuing up to buy buns? Why are you talking about first come first serve?"

"All of you get lost! The person who donates the most to this village every year is me. If there's a ticket, it should belong to me!"

Seeing is believing.

No one even knew where the ticket came from.

But they knew one thing—the one person who was least likely to team up with Ning Ning to lie to them was the village chief.

So, on the matter of the ticket suddenly appearing in front of the village chief—the one who did not believe what Ning Ning said the

most—they started to believe that it was most probably as Ning Ning had described: "Torturing a person, it does not matter if they are surnamed Ning, as long as the person is in pain and despair, Life Theater would send that person three tickets in succession."

The people were crowding around the small puddle. Those who couldn't get close to the puddle went up to the village chief, shaking his shoulders and shouting at him, wishing that he would immediately spit out the two remaining tickets.

"Ha, dog eats dog." Ning Yu Ren laughed coldly as she watched the events unfold from afar. She turned and looked at Ning Ning, staring at her without blinking for a very long time before she said blandly, "You're not Ning Ning, right? Who are you? ...What's going with you?"

Ning Ning did not know what Mama saw on her face.

She only felt that her face was very hot.

From when the villagers had begun to fight, her face started to feel hot.

...No, it was the mask that started to feel hot.

Ning Ning tore the mask off with one fell swoop. The part of her hand which had touched the mask felt like they were on fire, she loosened her grip from being burnt. The mask fell to the ground, rain was falling on top of it, turning to steam as they sizzled on contact. White smoke filled the air, it grew bigger and bigger, thicker and thicker, until it gradually became a white fog, enveloping everyone in the village.

"Everyone, look, what's that?" Someone suddenly shouted.

The fog appeared too strangely, it was weird and enormous.

Within it, Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren couldn't help but hug each other tightly, both of their hearts were thumping. Hearing the shouts of that person, Ning Ning looked in the direction of the sound, but the fog was too thick, she could not see the person's looks clearly at all. All she could see was within the extent of the white fog. One by one, the black shadows turned their head and looked in her direction.

They looked at what was behind her.

Ning Ning slowly looked back.

The fog of steam billowed, rolling in like clouds, the two lanterns in front of the entrance swayed to the right along with the thick fog. The lanterns illuminated a tall building, an old-fashioned movie theater.

Chapter 158

158: A Boundary that cannot be Crossed

"Haha, isn't it here now?" The village chief broke free from the hands of his two sons, limping as he ran a few steps forward. His snow white hair was scattered in the wind, the corners of his mouth cracked outwards. He abruptly turned towards the crowd, his right hand pointing to the front as he madly roared, "This is what you all wanted! This is 'Life Opera House'!"

After a moment of silence, one leg moved, followed by another, followed further by a rumble of footsteps.

"Don't block the way!" The grand lottery winner who was running at the front waved his hand around.

Ning Ning and Ning Yu Ren frantically got out of the way. They were forced to the corner of the stage by the crowd that was on the fringe of madness, holding each other up as they watched the crowd run one by one towards the theater that was sited in the deep parts of the fog. With a creak, the sound of an opening door rang out, like a hungry beast opening its mouth.

The figures disappeared into that mouth one by one.

"Quickly, quickly." The village chief was directing people at the entrance, he waved one of his hands with all his might, so excited that his face turned red. "All of you, go in! All of you, get in! You will know who to believe once you are inside, go in! There is wealth and power in there, as long as one family member enters, their descendants can all have endless benefits! Hold on...hold on!"

He reached out to block his younger son, he asked with an astonished and frantic expression, "What are you going in there for?"

His younger son was flushed, he was a little embarrassed. He glanced at the movie theater, then at the village chief, smiling in an attempt to please his father. "Dad, let me go in, no one in our family has gone in before... Let me go in, I'll make you and Big Brother rich, alright?"

The village chief was about to say something when another figure rushed past him.

It was his elder son.

"Stop, come back!" The village chief frantically tried to pull him back, but he failed. His elder son disappeared into the fog, his younger son whom he had been holding back then took this chance to get out of his grasp and ran into the fog.

The situation had spiralled out of control.

Not only the outsiders, with the two of them leading the way, the villagers also rushed in.

The chance to change the fate of a person, a family, how many people could resist a temptation like that?

...Everyone remembered the benefits the movie theater could give them, but they didn't remember the kind of price they had to pay...

"Come back! Quickly come back! You can't go in there!" The village chief shouted alone at the entrance.

His voice carried into the fog, what answered him was a loud sound—the entrance had closed down.

"Ah...ah..." The village chief legs gave out and he knelt down on the ground, clawing his face with both his hands, picking and pulling at the wrinkles on his forehead and murmuring, "What have I done..."

Clop, clop, clop...

He turned his head and looked at the person that was standing beside him. He slowly looked up and mumbled, "Ning Qing..."

Ning Qing picked up the owner's mask from the ground and said, "Beautifully done."

Afterwards, Ning Qing started laughing, his laughter got louder and louder, it got more and more maniacal, "Hahahaha!!!"

His laughter stopped abruptly, he turned around.

Ning Yu Ren stood in front of Ning Ning reflexively. It didn't matter that she suspected that the current Ning Ning was not her real daughter, but a certain audience member that had transmigrated into her daughter's body through the movie theater.

Ning Qing walked towards the two of them. He stopped in front of them, reaching out with the mask in hand.

"What are you trying to do?" Ning Yu Ren asked cautiously.

"Do you know where this thing comes from?" Ning Qing waved the mask up and down, shaking off the rainwater. "It was originally a box, a box which held stuff...guess what it was meant to hold?"

Ning Yu Ren looked down at the mask, then looked up at him.
"...Life Theater?"

"That's right." Ning Qing sighed deeply. "The owner from the past could bring the movie theater—in other words, the opera house—with him, it was because he had the box that held the opera house. Later on, the owner was murdered, the box was also torn apart, a portion of it was used as material for a mask, it was carved onto this mask."

As he finished, he reached out with the mask again.

Not only did Ning Yu Ren not take the mask, she opened up her arms instead to protect Ning Ning who was behind her.

"How did you know all these?" Ning Ning questioned Ning Qing behind her.

He knew a bit too much.

What the village chief did not know, what Mama did not know, even the things a lot of masked people did not know, how did he know?

Ning Ning hesitated for a moment before she asked, "Are you really...grandfather?"

"Is it...really you?"

Both Ning Ning and Ning Qing looked over at the same time. Cui Hong Mei stood a short distance away, looking straight over at them.

The village that was originally bustling from the ancestor worship ceremony was now in silence. The banquet that was full of food and drinks was now just a table full of wine glasses, glasses upon glasses with no one drinking from them. The seats that were originally filled to its capacity, were now completely empty, not an audience member remained. The stage only had a few people left on it—Ning Ning, Ning Yu Ren, the village chief, Li Bo Yue, Wen Yu...

As well as Cui Hong Mei and Ning Qing.

They looked at each other gently, the young man with a head full of black hair laughed and called out, "Little Plum Blossom1."

The old woman with wrinkles on her face and white hair was stunned, then could not help but run towards him.

Crossing the boundary that could not be crossed, the two of them hugged each other, white hair cuddling up with black hair.

Watching this scene, Ning Ning could not help but have doubts.

Was she overthinking it?

Maybe he was not something the movie theater made up but was her actual grandfather? After all, she might not recognise her grandfather, but her grandmother would recognise him, right?

The two of them hugged for a while. Cui Hong Mei raised her hand in an attempt to take off the mask on Ning Qing's face, but Ning Qing held her wrist and gently shook his head.

"It's time for me to go." He said, then he stopped hugging her. "Go back, don't follow me."

"Where are you going?" Cui Hong Mei looked at the movie theater behind him. "That place? Is it as they say...there's wealth and power in there?"

Ning Qing shook his head with a smile. "There are only four things in that place—happiness, sorrow, anger, joy."

After he said that, he pushed Cui Hong Mei away, turned around and walked into the fog. His voice rang out from a distance, "Life Theater, is actually not a place to fulfill a person's dream, it's collecting masks... Every mask actually represents a person's life, be it happiness, be it sorrow, be it anger, be it joy."

His voice disappeared into the fog.

The owner's mask which symbolised rage was left in Cui Hong Mei's hands.

Cui Hong Mei hugged the mask and looked at it for a little while. She abruptly turned her head to look at Ning Yu Ren, screaming, "Why are you not going in?"

Ning Yu Ren was taken aback, "I..."

"As long as one family member enters, their descendants can have endless benefits!" Cui Hong Mei repeated the words of the village chief, her eyes burning. "I don't know which of them are telling the truth, but since there's a place which could change your father's fate, which could change my fate, why wouldn't you go?"

"...What do you want me to do?"

Cui Hong Mei was usually very greedy. At this moment there were a lot of things she wanted in her heart—cars, houses, an inexhaustible amount of money. But when she opened her mouth, only one thing came out of it, "...Bring your father back."

Ning Yu Ren closed her eyes painfully. "...I can't do that."

"...Why?" Cui Hong Mei said in shock, "This is not even something that's very difficult, you have done things that were even more difficult, you turned from a little brat into a movie empress, what else can you not do? You..."

Her expression slowly twisted with rage, she screamed, "You can go in for your own sake, you can't go in for our sake? How can you be that cold-blooded and unfilial?! If you won't go, I will!"

"You can't go in without a ticket! You'll just die!"

"Then give me your ticket!"

Ning Yu Ren looked at her with a complicated expression, then shook her head.

Seeing that she could not get a ticket from her, Cui Hong Mei turned to look at Ning Ning, "You... Give me your ticket! Don't be as cold-blooded as your mother!"

Ning Yu Ren raised her arms to stop Cui Hong Mei, then looked back at Ning Ning and said, "What are you waiting for? Enter the movie theater. You can end this movie once you go in and return to your own body."

Ning Ning looked at her with an equally complicated expression. The other was using this method to confirm whether the person in front of her was her real daughter, or if she was an audience member from the movie theater.

There were many things she wanted to say, but now was not the time to have a heart-to-heart talk. Ning Ning rushed off the stage and held Wen Yu up, then under the surprised and relieved look of Ning Yu Ren, she helped him into the fog.

To have a little girl help a tall man walk was something that should be very strenuous.

But Ning Ning did not feel that at all.

He was very light.

"...When did you wake up?" She asked.

His right arm was on her shoulder, but he had been trying his best not to be a burden, holding up his body with great difficulty as he walked step by step. Wen Yu said, "I woke up a while ago. Apologies, I don't have much strength in my body, I couldn't be of much help."

"It's fine." Ning Ning said.

The white fog rolled past beside them like the milky way.

"...You have been going through life like this?" Wen Yu asked abruptly.

"What?"

"You have always been turning into characters one after another in the movie theater. Why? Was it to...hone your acting skills?"

Ning Ning thought about it, "It was like that in the beginning."

"Afterwards?"

Ning Ning looked at him. Was it an illusion? He was looking at her with an indescribably gentle and intimate expression.

"Afterwards, I discovered that I didn't transmigrate into a movie, I was transmigrating into a certain person's life instead." Ning Ning murmured, "What I had been facing were not actors, each one of them were actual people, sometimes...I don't know how I should face them."

"Was it you?" Wen Yu stared at her and asked, "Zhang Xin Ai—the Zhang Xin Ai who called me for help?"

Ning Ning hesitated for a moment before she nodded.

"Ning Ning." Wen Yu started to laugh. "In 1997, that little Ning Ning who held on to me and made me save someone with her."

Ning Ning nodded again.

"Yun Lin." Wen Yu smiled even more deeply. "The Teacher Yun Lin who told me that she had amnesia."

Ning Ning nodded again, then said impatiently, "That's enough, it was all me."

"Including the You Ling who acted in <<The Person within the Painting>>?"

"Yes."

"Then..." Wen Yu was suddenly a little nervous, he took a deep breath, then gently and very carefully called out, as if he was afraid that his voice would wake him up from a good dream. "Aunt Xiao Ning?"

1The mei in Cui Hong Mei shares a same word with plum blossom(meï flower) in Chinese.

Chapter 159

159: I'm Right Here

Being addressed as such made Ning Ning feel breathless, she did not know how to face him in that moment.

"No, yes, here..." Ning Ning spoke incoherently for a moment. She looked at him a little nervously before she said quietly, "What I mean to say is, I'm right here..."

Wen Yu seemed to be affected by her nervousness.

He frantically pulled his arm off her neck and stood up straight in front of her, as if he was accepting her, accepting the review of the most important person in his life. He took two deep breaths and said, "After the funeral, I was adopted by Mr Shi, he is a good person, I got on well."

"Yes," Ning Ning said, "I know."

"I studied medicine in university, then I switched to the psychological field. After I graduated, I worked at a psychological clinic... A lot of my customers are from the entertainment industry. There were people who said that I was after their money, but that was not the case, I just wanted to help them." Wen Yu looked at Ning Ning without blinking. "Help...people like you."

"Yes." A feeling Ning Ning had not felt in a long time crept into her heart, like an emerald moss, gently covering the ice cold wall. "I know..."

"I...have been trying my best to do good deeds, helping everyone I can."

"Yes, I know."

"God says, good begets good, and evil leads to evil, if there is good to be had from my good deeds, I hope they would befall a person." Wen Yu's eyes had a trace of the glistening of a teardrop. "I prayed that she would be able to return to the mortal realm. I prayed that when she comes back, she would be born in a good family—a mother who loves her, a father who protects her, I prayed that she could grow up without any troubles or worries, healthily, happily, and to once again...appear in front of me."

After he finished speaking, he took two deep breaths. He remained rooted on the spot as he opened his slightly trembling arms, waiting for her to hug him like when he was a child.

I remember you, love you, pray for you, I have always been waiting for you here.

Time quietly passed by, seeing that she didn't move, Wen Yu said with a little unease, "Aunt Xiao Ning..."

Afraid that he was making things difficult for her, he stopped speaking after that, the arms he raised up also dropped down dispiritedly.

In the next moment, someone hugged him.

"I'm here." Ning Ning hugged his waist, her face buried in his chest. "I'm right here."

I have always been by your side, I have never left.

Time spun around, the fog also spun around, it looked like it drew a circle between them from the ends of time. From the ends of the fog, the two of them met again.

"I'm also here." A mischievous voice rang out from beside them.

Ning Ning looked over, Shi Zhong Tang.

The fog had dissipated, it had come to an end, they had returned to Life Theater, returned to their own bodies.

"Who's there?" Wen Yu looked over.

She noticed where he was looking, Ning Ning frowned as she asked, "You still can't see?"

Shi Zhong Tang was standing right in front of them. Wen Yu looked at her and asked, "See whom?"

He really still could not see him.

It should have been due to the box that held Life Opera House. Even if it was made into a mask, it still had a special effect, it had allowed ordinary people who could not see the movie theater like Wen Yu and Cui Hong Mei to have the ability to see the movie theater in a limited period of time.

So, the reason the movie theater had not been doing well...was because the box was lost, because the mask was lost?

"It's your brother," Ning Ning said, "your brother is also here."

Wen Yu was stunned. "Brother..."

"Dummy, look over here." Shi Zhong Tang pressed down on his shoulders and turned him in a direction, then he hammered him on his chest as he laughed, "Little Brat, you're almost as tall as me already."

Wen Yu looked down at his own chest.

"He said: Little Brat, you're almost as tall as me already." Ning Ning said.

Wen Yu slowly looked up, there was no one in front of him, he slowly reached out with his fist, his fist was stopped mid-air by an invisible chest. After a long while, Wen Yu quietly called out, "Big Brother..."

Shi Zhong Tang tilted his head. Although his peach blossom mask covered his face, Ning Ning thought that the corners of the mouth behind the mask must be curved up.

"Say something." Ning Ning placed her hands behind her and smiled at Shi Zhong Tang. "I'll help you convey your words."

"My matters are not urgent, you're always by my side anyway." Shi Zhong Tang said with a laugh, "Let's attend to your matters first, you must want to see her right now."

He was always like this, seeing through her easily, seeing what she was really thinking of.

"What's the matter?" Wen Yu asked.

"I..." Ning Ning looked at Shi Zhong Tang, then looked at him, "I want to see someone."

Wen Yu thought about it before he smiled. "Is it your mother?"

"Yes." Ning Ning's eyes started to sparkle.

On the screen, <<A Chinese (Boy) Ghost Story>> had already begun screening, but none of the three of them stayed to watch. They walked out of the entrance together instead. The moment they walked out, Ning Ning stopped in her tracks and looked at the poster by the entrance.

Title: <<A Chinese (Boy) Ghost Story>>

Starring: Ning Qing, Ning Ning.

The poster was still very lively.

A group of masked people dressed in white was encircling Ning Qing and Ning Ning at the center of the stage.

She was still unable to change Ning Qing's fate. He was still a masked person who came out from the movie theater and returned to the movie theater. But she changed the fate of the villagers, she changed...the fate of Mama.

The person who danced on the altar till the end was her, it was not Mama who had substituted in for her halfway through!

Did that mean...Mama wouldn't have to die?

"Calm down." While they were on the car ride to her house, Wen Yu handed over a water bottle. "Want some?"

"Thanks." Ning Ning grabbed the water bottle, twisted it open and took a sip. Due to the fact that she was too nervous, some of it spilt out, she frantically wiped her mouth, her hand was trembling slightly.

Did she succeed? Can she see Mama again?

The tires came to a screeching halt, the car stopped at the foot of the building.

Ning Ning frantically got out of the car, she rushed up the building at her top speed, then she took out her keys from her purse in a panic and put the key in the keyhole.

With a click, the door gently opened.

She felt as anxious as a person returning to their hometown after being away for many years.

She was so anxious when she was going up the stairs, but she lost the courage to take the step forward at this moment.

"Go in." Wen Yu who had been behind her for an unknown time said.

"I'll go in with you." Shi Zhong Tang held her hand with a smile.

Ning Ning took a few deep breaths, raised her other hand and flicked the light switch.

Gentle light filled the place, it illuminated her and Mama's cozy little house.

She walked in gingerly. She walked past the shoe rack, it only had her shoes, she walked past the living room, it only had a tea set for one, she walked into Mama's room, the shoes Mama loved, the tea set Mama usually used, Mama's hat...Ning Ning had bought them back

from Cui Hong Mei and placed them back in their original positions neatly.

It was just that Ning Yu Ren was not around.

Ning Ning did not say a word, her eyes started to water.

"Don't cry." Shi Zhong Tang held her hand tightly, he bent down and looked at her. "Isn't there another place you have yet to visit?"

"...Right." Ning Ning wiped the tears out of the corner of her eyes, turning around to look at Wen Yu. "Can you send me on another trip? I want to go to the hospital."

How could Wen Yu reject her request?

The car stopped at the hospital entrance. Would this be the last chance? Ning Ning got out of the car. She looked at the hospital, filled with expectations and fear. It was not a hot day, but her back was covered in cold sweat.

Wen Yu took a look at Ning Ning, then another, he hesitated for a moment, then carefully held her hand.

No matter how strong a person was, they would still have times when they were weak, times where their entire body would go cold. At this moment, the most useful thing would be another person's warmth, another person's hand.

Her heart that was beating like a mad drum gradually calmed down, Ning Ning laughed at him hoarsely. "Thank you."

The three of them walked into the hospital together.

This time, Ning Ning walked very slowly, but there was a limit to how slow a person could be. The door to the ward opened, the hospital bed that Mama once laid in...was empty.

Time seemed to stop at that moment.

After a very long while, Ning Ning got her hearing back. She heard a familiar voice by her side, "What brings you here, are you feeling unwell?"

"Uncle Huang..." Ning Ning looked at the white coat beside her—Ning Yu Ren's former attending doctor, Doctor Huang. She hesitated for a moment before she asked, "When my mama left...was it painful?"

Doctor Huang was taken aback, then he smiled gently. "No, I think she was more blissful than a lot of other people, because in the end...you were by her side."

"Is that so..." Ning Ning murmured, tears rolled down her face continuously.

Doctor Huang was very busy, he could not remain there to console her, someone called for him after a while, he told them he would be right there. He looked back at Ning Ning, he saw that her hand was held by Wen Yu in the corner of his eye.

"Young Man, console her well." Doctor Huang gave Wen Yu's shoulder a pat. "This is a good girl, she's worth your effort."

Wen Yu was stunned for a moment, then he nodded solemnly.

Even if no one told him to, he would still treat Ning Ning well.

...After all, he was no longer a child, he had strong enough arms to shelter her from the wind and rain now, didn't he?

After Doctor Huang left, Ning Ning cried on the spot for a while, sobbing, "Actually I've...guessed that this would be how it ends."

She looked at the hospital bed in front of her. She had wished so much that the person she loved the most was lying on it, looking at her, gently telling her, "I'm right here."

But the bed was empty, there was no one on it.

She was not here.

"Mama could enter Life Theater for the sake of changing my fate, then there is no reason she would not go in after she found out what happened to Grandfather." Ning Ning cried. "She's always like this, silently giving, not letting us know."

If she had not entered Life Theater, Ning Ning would have never known how much Ning Yu Ren had done for her.

Changing one's fate was a very dangerous thing. The past and the future were closely connected, changing one thing would affect everything. Sometimes, she clearly only wanted to change one person's fate, but she would accidentally change the fate of a lot of people.

Ning Yu Ren paid with her life after she took this path.

She successfully saved Ning Ning.

But it was very obvious, her luck was not always so good, in the end, she still could not save Ning Qing...as well as herself.

"Give way, please give way!" Doctor Huang's voice rang out behind Ning Ning. She looked around and saw a stretcher getting pushed

from the entrance, on the stretcher was a familiar face—Director Chen.

"Stop! Stop!" Director Chen saw her too, he shouted his head off.

The stretcher stopped, Director Chen got up with the help of Chen Shuang He. He was panting, shouting at Ning Ning as if it was his last breath, "I'm dying soon, before I die, I have to leave something in the world...Ning Ning, get ready! I want to reshoot <<Phantom of the Theater>>!!"

Chapter 160

160: What Hurts Me

Director Chen fell sick.

The news spread like wildfire, some unscrupulous tabloids had already published his obituary.

"He's now holding on to his last breath." Li Bo Yue placed the contract in front of Ning Ning. "His time should be up around the time this show finishes filming. The tabloids are not wrong, this is probably his last piece of work in his life."

In other words, his swan song.

Ning Ning picked up the contract to take a look, she casually asked a question, "What happened to the villagers afterwards?"

A sentence that came out of nowhere, but Li Bo Yue followed up on it.

"You came out without finishing <<A Chinese (Boy) Ghost Story>>?" He said with a smile.

There was a saying: *Everyone is an actor in life.*

Ning Ning did not believe that up until this moment, she believed it now.

The best actor was right beside her. Li Bo Yue had known about the existence of Life Theater long ago, he might even have known that Mama had been relying on the theater to hone her acting skills, that she was also relying on the theater to hone her acting skills.

"...There was something I have always thought of as a coincidence," Ning Ning said, "every time I return from the theater, I will always receive the roles that are extremely similar to the roles I transmigrated as..."

Li Bo Yue looked at her with a smile.

That expression of non surprise seemed to have already given her the answer.

"My father and your mother are from the same village," he crossed both his hands on his knees as he said leisurely, "if they were to have

stayed in the Ning Village and never left, then they would have probably been married according to the traditions of the village—you would have to address me as Big Brother."

Ning Ning looked at him without saying anything.

"Of course, it's fine if you want to address me as such now." Li Bo Yue said with a smile, "Because even after they had left the village, my father continued to care for your mother. He also cared for you—of course, I'm the same as well...I care for you."

His eyes were burning with ambition, it clearly showed that his care was not out of sincerity...but out of ambition.

Ning Ning stared at him for a while then asked, "What do you want?"

Li Bo Yue leaned back on the sofa, he seemed to be reminiscing, also seemed to be organising his words.

"All these while, my dad has been researching Ning Village together with Pei Xuan, they have been researching Life Opera House." He said slowly, "At first, I thought he was being conned, afterwards, I realised...it was real. Life Opera House really existed in this world, there is really a place which could turn a person immortal."

...Immortal?

Ning Ning thought hard about it, but did not expect that his main area of concern was actually this. She was stunned for a moment before she said, "Don't...tell me that you want to be a masked person?"

"Masked person?" Li Bo Yue shook his head and smiled, "No, I think the doorman is more suitable for me."

"...Do you know what you're talking about?" Ning Ning looked at him grimly. "Do you know what the doorman does?"

"I only know that everyone dies. It was the case for Pei Xuan, it's the case for Director Chen, it would be the case for me." Li Bo Yue looked at her with an equally grim expression. "Pei Xuan left even earlier than Director Chen. He left last year, the time frame was not that far off from your mother, do you know what his last regret was?"

It couldn't be...

Li Bo Yue started smiling. "He regretted that he left the theater. No matter how rich he became, he would still get old, fall sick, and die. Yet, if he had remained as the doorman, then even after we have all died, he would still be alive."

"So, you're serious?" Ning Ning looked at him in disbelief. "You really want to be a masked person?"

He didn't know...or had Pei Xuan say something on his deathbed that misled him, causing him to only see the benefits of being a masked person, blind to the downsides of being a masked person.

"A masked person wouldn't be good enough." Li Bo Yue shook his head, seeming to have remembered something, his eyes revealed the lingering fear in his heart. "Those people from the Ning Village...they went in without a ticket, they suffered too much under the then doorman. I don't want to end up like them. If there was a choice, humans would also choose the side that rules, not the side that's being controlled by someone, isn't that so?"

He reached out towards Ning Ning.

His face was ever familiar, with an ambitious and determined smile.

"I've helped you so much," he said, "you have to help me too."

In the face of death, there were people who would start to come up with detailed long term plans, there were people who reached the verge of madness.

"Cut!! Cut!! Cut! Cut! Cut!!"

Two months later, on the set of <<Phantom of the Theater>>, Director Chen shouted cut repeatedly from a wheelchair. He ended up coughing violently from shouting, his assistant who was standing beside him frantically poured his medicine into his palm.

"Cough, cough, cough..." Director Chen stuffed the medicine in his mouth as he shivered, then grabbed a cup of warm water and took a few sips out of it and swallowed the medicine. He panted for a long while before he told Ning Ning, "Come with me for a moment."

Ning Ning pushed his wheelchair to the side to take a break.

In two months, Director Chen had lost quite a lot of weight. He lost so much weight that he seemed deformed, no matter who saw him, they would advise him to quickly rest in bed, not to expend his remaining life, but he wouldn't listen, he would rather burn his life out for this movie.

"Ning Ning," he asked Ning Ning while seated on the wheelchair with his back to her, "have you ever loved a man?"

Ning Ning remembered the fear from getting forcefully matchmade,

the corner of her mouth twitched. "I have."

Director Chen laughed coldly. "Not the familial kind of love, can you love a person like how I love movies?"

Ning Ning fell silent.

The wheelchair stopped by the corridor. Red maple leaves were scattering down outside of the corridor, the red leaves fell onto the wooden corridor one by one, at the former mansion of the Qu family which turned into the Orchid Theater afterwards. This was the first place that was used to film <<Phantom of the Theater>>, it was also the last place that was being used to film <<Phantom of the Theater>>.

"...Go fall in love with someone," Director Chen said abruptly, "I need you to fall in love with someone."

"...Who?" Ning Ning asked.

"Anyone will do," Director Chen said, "all I need is for you to use the passion of having been in love into this movie, bring about, bring about the phantom."

The wind blew a piece of red leaf past Ning Ning's temple. She raised a hand to gather her hair and shook her head. "...I can't do that."

Director Chen looked back at her. His eyes that looked exceptionally big due to his emaciation had a very terrifying look.

"Director Chen, for the sake of a movie, you can do anything, you can ignore anyone, but I cannot." Ning Ning told him without changing her expression, "I cannot harm another person for the sake of a movie."

After all, a movie is a movie, real life is real life.

On a sour note, after getting a huge scolding, Ning Ning left the set cutting a sorry figure. There were regrets, but if she were to do that again, she would probably have said and done the same thing.

"I don't want to turn into a person like Director Chen after all..." She murmured.

"Ning Ning!"

Ning Ning looked back and saw a person waiting by the entrance.

"What brings you here?" She asked.

Wen Yu walked towards her with a smile. 'Aunt Xiao Ning' was

what he addressed her in private, in front of outsiders, he still addressed her directly with her name so that they would not attract strange looks.

"Here." He handed the gift box in his arms to Ning Ning.

Ning Ning took it out of his hands, "What's this?"

Wen Yu smiled, "Open it up and take a look?"

Ning Ning opened the box, in it was a costume—the blue costume the phantom wore in the show.

"I heard that you have not been progressing well recently." Wen Yu smiled gently. "I was pondering if you would want to do what you did in the past, to act as the phantom—be it in the show or real life—so that you can maintain your mental state."

Ning Ning did have that kind of plan. She closed the box and smiled at him... "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Wen Yu paused for a moment, before he told her solemnly, "Also, you can call me anytime, I will answer your call no matter when you call me."

Back home, she placed the box on a chair, her clothes falling to the floor piece by piece. Ning Ning wore that costume in front of the mirror, then she touched her own reflection.

Ning Ning let out a mocking laugh, "Can I only wear this at home in the future?"

With Director Chen's temper, even if she was the female lead, it would not be impossible for him to have her changed.

"You might as well. Wear it for me, for me alone." Shi Zhong Tang sat down behind her, placing both his palms up, like an infatuated audience member eagerly anticipating sharing a stage with their favourite actor.

The lips in the mirror curved up, Ning Ning turned around and tossed her long-flowing sleeves as she sang, "*Orioles dream-waking coil their song, through all the brilliant riot of the new season.*"

The flowing sleeves were tossed at Shi Zhong Tang who looked up and smiled. The snow white sleeves fell on the mask on his face, bit by bit they slid off from his mask onto his chest. He gently grabbed them in his palm.

"*Orioles dream-waking coil their song, through all the brilliant riot of the new season.*" His peach blossom eyes looking toward Ning Ning,

he sang as well, with an even more tender tone, with even more sincerity, as if he had shattered his heart and put it into the song, like he would die at the end of the song.

Sweet nothings might be moving, but they were not as moving as his singing.

Ning Ning paused for a moment, before she followed up, "*I am the partner born of the fairest line, for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past.*"

"I am the partner born of the fairest line, for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past."

"Everywhere I have searched in compassion for you, secluded in your chamber."

"Everywhere I have searched in compassion for you, secluded in your chamber."

"There, just beyond this railing, peony lined against the mound of weather Tai-hu rocks."

"There, just beyond this railing, peony lined against the mound of weather Tai-hu rocks."

"Somewhere at some past time you and I met..." Ning Ning's voice turned softer and softer until it finally went completely quiet.

"Why aren't you singing anymore?" Shi Zhong Tang tugged the flowing sleeves towards himself, pulling her closer.

Ning Ning's chest rose and fell, she gazed at him silently. How could she continue singing? He did not say anything to profess his love, but every word he sang, every line, was telling her: I love you.

"..There's no need." Ning Ning steeled her heart and said coldly, "I don't need you to do that, there's so many shows I can act in, I don't have to act as the phantom."

After a pause, she looked down. "...What Director Chen said, don't listen to him."

I don't want to love or harm a person for the sake of a movie.

Shi Zhong Tang looked up at her for a moment. He got up and walked towards her, the flowing sleeves fell from between his fingers, he lifted Ning Ning's face with his hand.

"But, you, not loving me...", he looked down at her and said, "that's what hurts me."

After a while, he started laughing helplessly again, his other hand also caressing her face. "I was joking, don't take it to heart... Don't cry, I'm not deliberately trying to make things difficult for you."

Chapter 161

161: Choose Me

What exactly are my feelings towards him?

She could not help but have her vision lingered on him. It was impossible to say that she was completely indifferent about him, but to say that she was passionately in love with him like how Director Chen...not many people could do that.

Because Director Chen loved too insanely, he burned everything, sacrificed everything. In the end, he was going to sacrifice himself as well.

"Ready up."

Ning Ning suddenly came back to her senses, she realised that everyone in the crew was looking at her.

"Ready up." Director Chen said coldly to her while seated in his wheelchair, "<<Phantom of the Theater>>, scene fifteen—Seeing Heaven—has already begun."

The one who portrayed the male lead Lu Yun He was still Director Chen's son, Chen Shuang He.

For the sake of this role, he had especially lost five kilograms of weight. He was wearing a blanched t-shirt, making him look even more skinny and pitiful. Amidst the autumn wind, he was holding a broom, sweeping, then abruptly looking back at the stage behind him with eyes filled with envy and yearning.

He looked to the left and right, then all of a sudden, he smiled happily and placed the broom to the side, climbing onto the stage with both his arms and legs. He clapped his hands as he stood up, copying the main actor in his memory, taking a few steps pretentiously as he put his hands behind his back and sang, *"I am the partner born of the fairest line, for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past."*

It was haphazard, he was just singing for his own pleasure.

He sang this song back and forth a few times. When he finally sang it for the fourth time, just as he was singing the second part, an answer came from the floor above, "I am the partner born of the

fairest line, for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past."

It was so genteel, it was so moving, it was such an unfamiliar...female voice.

She stopped after singing one line, as if waiting for Chen Shuang He to continue.

Chen Shuang He was astonished for a moment. He frantically pinched his throat, gulped down mouthfuls of water to moisten his throat, then corrected his tone and copied how she sang, *"I am the partner born of the fairest line, for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past."*

"Everywhere I have searched in compassion for you, secluded in your chamber."

"Everywhere I have searched in compassion for you, secluded in your chamber."

"There, just beyond this railing, peony lined against the mound of weather Tai-hu rocks."

"There, just beyond this railing, peony lined against the mound of weather Tai-hu rocks."

Line by line, she sang a line, he sang a line.

Until her voice no longer rang out, Chen Shuang He opened his eyes that had been long closed, his chest undulated a little, his body slightly shivered for a reason unknown to him.

He took deep breaths while he stood on the spot, then he walked towards the second floor.

The camera followed after his footsteps. The wooden staircase creaked as his shoes stepped on it, there was the sound of a door opening. On the box seat that could look down on the entire audience, there was an old-fashioned wooden armchair in the center. He carefully walked over, but there was no one in sight.

He looked at the old-fashioned wooden armchair for a good while before he abruptly sat in it, placing both his hands nervously on the armrests, then slowly brought them up to the ala of his nose. It was as if he was grasping the mark of her presence into his hands, then giving it a whiff as he brought them up to the ala of his nose.

"Cut." Director Chen's voice rang out, he frowned and said, "This part will not do...this action is a little extraneous."

Chen Shuang He put his hands down, turning his head to look at

him.

"You're putting too much into it, Lu Yun He's love is not so deep-rooted." Director Chen scolded him curtly, "Remember, you are slowly getting attracted to the phantom, you are not supposed to get closer on your own. Moreover, the story has just begun, you don't love her at all, you are just curious with a little adoration."

"And you..." Director Chen turned his head and looked towards Ning Ning, his brows furrowed. "...Your acting is too bland again. Go ponder over it yourself, how you should captivate a man as a woman."

Captivating men as women, there were all sorts of ways—relying on their looks, their talent, even pity, but it was very obvious that Director Chen did not want any of these.

After bumping about, the first day of filming finally ended. Everyone was sweating, some people were sweaty from tiredness, the others were sweaty from being scolded by Director Chen.

"I have a suggestion," On the way back, Chen Shuang He called out to Ning Ning, "do you want to hear it?"

"What is it?" Ning Ning stopped in her tracks and looked at him.

Chen Shuang He did not answer her immediately, he scanned the surroundings cautiously instead. He pulled to a deserted corner, looked down and asked her, "What do you...think of me?"

Ning Ning, "???"

Chen Shuang He gulped down some saliva. Currently, he looked like the male lead—Lu Yun He. He moistened his throat then said, "Your problem, my father had discussed it with me previously. Do...you want to go into a relationship with me?"

At that moment, Ning Ning reflexively wanted to look behind her.

"*Cough*, what I mean to say is...you can make use of me, I don't mind." Chen Shuang He put his fist up to his lips, coughing as he tried his best to organise his words, but he was still a little incoherent, "I will work hard to coordinate with you, you can start it anytime, you can also end it anytime, I won't cause you troubles. Will...you consider it?"

After that, afraid that Ning Ning would give him an answer on the spot, Chen Shuang He frantically found an excuse to leave.

As Ning Ning watched his figure escaping in a frenzy, a voice rang out behind her.

"I can't compare to him."

Ning Ning looked back and saw Shi Zhong Tang standing behind her.

"With him by your side, you will be well-regarded, along with envious looks from others." Shi Zhong Tang shifted his eyes away from Chen Shuang He and slowly looked at her, his smile hid a trace of his pain. "But I... Only you can see me."

"I don't need to be well-regarded, neither do I need to be envied." Ning Ning said.

"I cannot even give you a wedding..." Shi Zhong Tang said.

"I have never thought of getting married," Ning Ning interrupted him, "I have long decided to follow in Mama's footsteps, giving my life to the stage."

"What he can do for you, I cannot do..." Shi Zhong Tang said again.

"What you can do for me, he cannot do!" Ning Ning's voice was a little agitated, she did not know what she was so agitated about, she further did not know what he was trying to prove.

Shi Zhong Tang looked down at her. They looked into each other's eyes, both of them remained silent for a while. Shi Zhong Tang then spoke slowly, "Actually his suggestion is not bad, why not...make use of him?"

Ning Ning did not know where the chagrin and rage in her heart came from, she only heard herself scream, "I can't do that!"

Shi Zhong Tang suddenly raised his hand to cover her mouth, pushing her into the room behind her then closing the door behind him.

Upon hearing the scream, the crew member who peeked out looked around for a moment before they turned and left.

Behind the door, Shi Zhong Tang pressed Ning Ning to the wall, his eyes were smiling as he looked at her.

"...Because you can't just do it with anyone." He covered her mouth, then said the answer in her heart for her, "Ning Ning, you love me."

After that day, filming was suddenly on the right track.

Or maybe one could say that Ning Ning's performance was suddenly able to reach Director Chen's standards.

Everything went very smoothly, Director Chen even looked for

Chen Shuang He and asked him privately, "What happened? She accepted your suggestion?"

Chen Shuang He turned to look outside the window, her figure reflected in his pupils from a distance. He laughed bitterly. "She didn't, but I think...I know what happened..."

Anxiety.

Unparalleled anxiety.

Ning Ning did not know where her anxiety came from, every time Director Chen told her: "very good" and "passed", her anxiety got worse. She wished she could look at him and shout, "Why don't you continue shouting cut at me! This is absolutely terrible!"

Because by doing that...it felt like he was telling her: You have fallen in love with someone...

No!! She was not prepared yet!!

Back home, Ning Ning laid down on her bed, burying her face deep in her blanket.

"What's the matter?" The bed dented in, Ning Ning looked over and saw Shi Zhong Tang lie down on his belly beside her, holding up his cheek with one hand as he looked at her. He smiled happily as he asked, "What are you thinking of?"

What else could she be thinking of?

"...I don't want to be like this." Ning Ning told him, "Yes, I admit I have feelings towards you, but...we should be a little more careful. I'm currently very doubtful of myself, am I in love with you because of the needs of the movie? I don't want it to be like this, I don't want it to be because of a movie...I feel like I'm using you..."

After speaking incoherently for a long while, Ning Ning looked away. She rubbed her face and murmured in a low voice, "What exactly am I saying..."

Wouldn't that be admitting that she was seriously considering the feelings they had for each other?

She said that she didn't want to get married, she swore that she did not want to fall in love, but what was she doing now? What was she saying now?

Shi Zhong Tang tilted his head and looked at her, Ning Ning's bed was placed against the window, it was open, the white curtains were floating towards the two of them like the wings of a dove. There was a

small potted plant on the windowsill, there was a little green on it, a sprout had broken through the dirt, waiting to bloom into a flower.

"Don't be that anxious." Shi Zhong Tang started laughing. "I'll sing a song for you."

"There's no need." Ning Ning buried her face in her palms as she said so.

"I am the partner born of the fairest line," Shi Zhong Tang started singing to her, "for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past."

A flock of doves flew over outside the window.

Only she could see the man, only she could hear him sing.

He sang the song to her three times, Shi Zhong Tang suddenly grabbed her wrist and shifted her fingers away from her face.

"Why are you blushing?" He asked with a smile.

"None of your business." Ning Ning looked away, leaving him with only one red ear.

Shi Zhong Tang pulled her fingers to the front of him, he looked down at her slender fingers with pity, "What a pity, it's not convenient to have this mask on. Right now, I want to kiss your fingers. Ning Ning, do you know? The finger is actually much more sensitive than the lips, there's no need to actually kiss it, you only need to gently rub your lips on it..."

"Shut up! What are you talking about? I-I don't understand dirty talk!" Ning Ning looked back with an exasperated expression.

"Alright, I'll say something you understand." Shi Zhong Tang clung onto her hand. "Let me be the first to say, I love you. I'll let you make the final decision..."

After a pause, he got serious, he said solemnly with a little bit of nervousness, "Choose me."

Chapter 162

162: Dining Knife

Having worked for many years, no matter if it was a new customer or a regular, Wen Yu had always insisted on speaking face-to-face.

"I live very far away, I won't be able to make it today."

"Then you can come over the next time you're free."

After he hung up, Wen Yu looked at the unique customer who was sitting across the dining table.

Technology had come a long way, there were mobile phones and computers, a person's voice and visual could be transmitted from thousands of miles away, but he still liked to talk face-to-face, because only then could the little body movements and expressions speak for the person.

The words that couldn't be spoken.

Within ten minutes, Ning Ning had already drunk three cups of tea, Wen Yu called the waiter to take the already empty teapot away and bring a new pot of flower tea. He refilled her cup as he smiled. "Are you very thirsty?"

"Ah...a little." Ning Ning raised her tea cup with slight embarrassment.

She was not thirsty, she just wanted to ask him something.

"Feeling troubled recently?" Wen Yu took the initiative and asked so that she would not continue to hesitate, words stuck in her throat.

She quickly took a glimpse around her. This glimpse did not escape Wen Yu's eyes, he looked to her side. "Big Brother, do you want something to drink?"

"...He's not here today." Ning Ning said in a quiet voice, "I have something that I wanted to say to you alone."

Wen Yu immediately understood, she wanted to say something related to his brother.

"How have you two been recently?" He probed.

"We're fine." Ning Ning's expression was tangled up for a moment

before she suddenly asked, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"How do you see the two of us?"

"In what sense?"

"Every sense." Ning Ning hesitated for a long while, then asked with a stammer, "If, if...the two of us want to be together?"

The little finger that was on his thigh trembled a little, Wen Yu quickly thought to himself, "The two of them are the people I love the most in the world, of course I hope the two of them would be together."

How good he was at seeing through a person's feelings was how good he was at controlling his own feelings. He leaned back onto the sofa, both his eyebrows were knitted inwards, his eyes drooped as he murmured, "You guys are in a unique situation..."

Ning Ning held her heart and calmed down as she stared at him.

"My brother might not be able to give you an official wedding." He suddenly looked up towards Ning Ning as he asked with a serious expression, "Do you mind that?"

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment, then she chuckled.

That smile was full of reminiscence, Wen Yu thought that Big Brother most probably had asked her the same question.

"I don't mind." Sure enough, she gave a definite answer without thinking.

"There's also the secular views of the world." Wen Yu looked out of the window, there were a few reporters lying in wait downstairs. "It would be fine if you were still the 'Queen of Crap Films', but you're popular now. You will get even more popular in the future, the media will dig up everything about you and show them to the public, especially your relationship matters."

"I know." Ning Ning picked up the teacup, rose petals floated on the surface of the cup along with dense white steam from the tea, smiling. "At first, they will say that I am an old virgin. Next, they will suspect that I am having mental issues, hallucinating having a boyfriend."

"Will you be able to take it?"

"I don't know."

"Will you be able to give up?"

"..." This time Ning Ning thought for a very long before she put the teacup down, "I won't."

She looked at Wen Yu helplessly, her eyes were filled with yearning, she yearned for him to say something to her again, but Wen Yu did not say anything. There were things Wen Yu could help her sort out, but there were things that she had to decide for herself.

"...I don't know if I would be able to take it, I think I'm not a very strong person." Ning Ning sighed. She leaned back on the sofa and closed her eyes for quite a while, then she slowly opened them. "But I...am willing to try."

She had finally made up her mind.

This was all thanks to one person.

"Thank you, Little Yu." Ning Ning reached out and covered the back of his hand with her hand, she looked at him gently and intimately.

Wen Yu tried his best to control himself so that his hand would not tremble, he smiled at her as usual, "You're welcome...Aunt Xiao Ning."

A phone rang. Ning Ning retracted her hand, picked up her phone and took a look. "I should go back to the set. Thank you, I'll treat you to a meal next time."

She left in a hurry, leaving only the tea cup with two rose petals in it.

Wen Yu sat alone in front of the dining table. This was a coffee shop that was full of vintage flavour, the waiters who were walking about were dressed up as butlers and maids from England, behind him was a cuckoo wall clock—rather than calling it a clock, it might be better to call it an art piece.

A little theater carved out of wood, there were the female lead and male lead as well as other wooden puppets. They stood quietly outside of the theater, seemingly waiting for the clock to strike twelve, there were three more seconds, three...

Wen Yu sighed.

Two...

Wen Yu reached out towards the tea cup in front of him.

One...

Wen Yu's finger touched the handle on the side of the tea cup.

Time's up! *Ding dong!*

The cuckoo clock made a happy sound, the unmoving puppets that were silent seemed to come alive with the music, they spun around and danced.

"Ding dong!" Not only did the outstretched finger not pick up the tea cup, it pushed forward instead, the tea cup fell to the floors and broke into a few pieces.

Wen Yu's upper body sprawled on the table, his cheek were pressed down on it, he stopped moving, his breathing seemed to have stopped as well.

A waiter holding a steak knocked on the door, he called out to Wen Yu a few times. He carefully pushed open a crack, then immediately followed by screaming, he rushed in and said, "Sir, are you alright?"

Wen Yu remained face down without moving, his right hand quickly grabbed the dining knife on the table. In the instant the waiter got close, the knife reached the throat of the waiter.

"Apologies," after a moment, Wen Yu cracked a satisfied smile, "conditioned reflex."

The waiter looked down and stared at the knife in front of his throat, he was afraid that it would pierce him, he slowly cracked a timid and ingratiating smile. "It's-it's fine..."

Wen Yu put the knife back, then took out some cash to give to the waiter. He thought about it, then added another note. He put the dining knife in his bag.

"Will that do?" He asked politely after he was done with the cash and knife.

The waiter nodded incessantly as he stiffly took the money.

Wen Yu smiled at him gently. "Thank you."

He walked by the waiter. Just as the waiter finally breathed a sigh of relief, his voice suddenly rang out behind him, "One final question."

The waiter immediately stiffened up, he looked over as he trembled. "Ask away!"

"< <Phantom of the Theater> >," as if he was chewing carefully, Wen Yu masticated these four words once, then slowly asked the other, "has this movie screened yet?"

Filming for < <Phantom of the Theater> > had already gotten past the halfway point.

The male lead that Chen Shuang He portrayed had his skills improved tremendously under the guidance and help of the mysterious Phantom. It just so happened that the leading actor was injured from an accident and could not perform, so he replaced the leading actor in the performance and achieved overnight fame.

The next part they were filming was the part where Lu Yun He rushed back to the theater excitedly after getting applauded by thousands of people, wanting to share his success and happiness with another person.

"A!"

"Teacher!" The door was pushed open suddenly, Chen Shuang He rushed in amidst the snowy winds, white puffs of breath came out of his mouth as he breathed. He wore only one layer of clothes but did not feel cold, shouting excitedly, "Teacher, did you watch my performance today? Teacher, are you here? Teacher, Teacher!"

"I heard you." A lazy voice rang out from the darkness at the same time as a lantern lighting up.

The night was too dark, he could not see the face of the other party, all he saw was the hand that was beside the lantern, gently beckoning in a charming manner. "Come over."

Chen Shuang He was like an innocent and pure white lamb walking towards the other party.

Before he got to the front of the other party, a hand came out of the darkness like a snake coming out of a dark cave, wrapping around his arm and impatiently pulling him in.

Amidst the darkness, a pair of bright eyes stared at him.

"You did very well." Ning Ning loosened her grip, her fingers lightly caressing his cheek, gently and sweetly. "Extremely well."

Her movement and voice placated Chen Shuang He, his nervous expression gradually loosened up.

"I saw everything. Those fools submitted themselves under your feet." Ning Ning laughed, her voice was filled with sarcasm and pride, her fingers teased Chen Shuang He's chin as if she was teasing a pet. "My disciple, my...substitute."

A trace of pain appeared on Chen Shuang He's face.

But at that moment, Ning Ning had already been completely absorbed in her own world, she did not see his pain. One hand held

the lantern, the other was pressing on the mask on her face, she laughed out even more biting. "I cannot let anyone see me, hear me, but I have you now! You are my substitute! You can sing for me, act for me, people can see me through you! Submit to me! Hahaha!"

Her laughter stopped, she slowly looked back at Chen Shuang He. "...Look up."

As she said so, she brought the lantern towards him.

Chen Shuang He did not look up. The lantern illuminated the tears that rolled down his chin, sparkling like crystal.

"...Why are you crying?" Ning Ning was surprised, then asked stiffly.

Chen Shuang He took a quick glance at her before he quickly looked back down, his tears falling drop by drop.

"...This is not the only reason I've taught you how to perform." Under his vision, a pair of feet slowly walked up in front of him, then a pair of hands gently hugged him, the world's most moving voice gently said by his ear, "Their sight are just a fleeting moment of ostentatious vanity, only your eyes...can turn me from a phantom that doesn't exist, into a person who does exist, so..."

Chen Shuang He slowly looked up at her.

Ning Ning smiled at him from the darkness. "Look at me, sing for me."

Chen Shuang He looked at her like he was bewitched. After half an instant, he opened his mouth, like a canary in a cage singing for its master, *"I am the partner born of the fairest line, for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past."*

"Everywhere I have searched in compassion for you, secluded in your chamber."

"There, just beyond this railing, peony lined against the mound of weather Tai-hu rocks."

Halfway through the song, a long-haired woman fell behind Chen Shuang He, her hair dancing in the air like seaweed.

Ning Ning locked eyes with her.

Then, a thud.

The sound of a heavy object falling.

Chapter 163

163: Masked Person's Lover

The person who fell was the makeup artist from the crew.

The ambulance was still on the way, Director Chen was on the phone.

Ning Ning heard what he claimed in the call, "A little accident."

"It's not a mere accident." Ning Ning folded her arms, telling Chen Shuang He in a low voice, "You saw it too, right?"

"Yes." Chen Shuang He had a terrible expression on his face.

The two of them looked up at the attic together.

The makeup artist had fallen from the attic. Because there was no one around her, Director Chen was sure that it was an accident.

But both of them had seen it. When the makeup artist fell, a figure flashed by in the attic.

Although it was just a glimpse, both of them saw that the person had a mask on their face—a rabbit mask.

"I asked the others." Chen Shuang He scanned the surrounding people. "Besides the two of us, the rest of the people said that they didn't see anything, including the ones at the scene."

A person whom only two of them could see...

The identity of that person was almost certain.

"A masked person..." Ning Ning murmured.

At this moment a staff member walked over and said to Ning Ning, "Miss Ning, there's someone outside asking for you, he said he knows you, his name is Wen Yu."

He came at the right time, Ning Ning had something to talk to him about.

Ning Ning had the staff member bring Wen Yu to the rest area, then gave Director Chen a heads up before she went to look for Wen Yu.

With a knock on the door. "Wen Yu, I'm here."

"...Come in."

At the instant she opened the door, a hand suddenly reached from in front of her.

Ning Ning was pulled into the room, the door was closed and locked with a bang.

...If the person standing in front of her was not Wen Yu but another man, Ning Ning probably would have shouted for help; but it was Wen Yu, so she frowned and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Apologies," Wen Yu looked back, he said apologetically, "conditioned reflex."

...What kind of conditioned reflex was that? Ning Ning looked at him speechlessly, she thought that he was looking at her with a very strange expression.

He looked at her like a person looking at a stranger. From her eyebrows to her nose, from her nose to the mole on her cheek, then from the mole on her cheek to her lips, recognising her bit by bit. After confirming her identity, he breathed a sigh of relief then reached out to hug her.

Ning Ning felt a little confused by his sudden hug. She asked after a long while, "What's the matter with you today?"

"...Nothing."

"But the way you were looking at me just now...it made me feel a little creeped out." Ning Ning faked a laugh. "It feels like...you have not seen me in decades."

"Madam Qin is dead." Wen Yu said suddenly after a moment of silence.

Ning Ning was stunned, "Who?"

"My customer." Wen Yu loosened his hand, restraint returned to his frame and face. He turned back to the Wen Yu Ning Ning knew. He told her calmly, "Do you remember? We went to her house together, she opened the door while covered in blood. Later on, the police suspected that she was the culprit who murdered her boyfriend."

With his reminder, Ning Ning remembered the person. "I remember her, how is she? Was the real culprit...caught?"

She did not hold out much hope, because how could an invisible person be caught?

As expected, Wen Yu shook his head and said, "She could not endure the criticism of people, so she committed suicide."

Ning Ning fell silent.

The Wen Yu today felt a little unfamiliar to her.

Although he and Madam Qin were just at doctor-and-patient relationship level, he was acting too cold, it even made her heart shudder. The tone akin to reporting news, that indifferent attitude...

After she calmed down, Ning Ning was asked, "Come to think of it, you mentioned to me that Madam Qin's ex-husband is a masked person with a rabbit mask, right?"

A piece of drawing paper was laid out on the table, Wen Yu provided both the pen and paper. That was not strange, even if he pursued the profession of being a doctor, he could not change the habit of bringing drawing supplies around with him.

"It looks something like this..." Ning Ning drew on the piece of paper as she said.

"Let me take a look." Wen Yu stood behind Ning Ning, his eyes stared at the drawing paper on the table.

On the table was a masked person.

He was neither fat nor slim, his physique was very ordinary, on his face was a rabbit mask. The combination of that physique and the mask made him look harmless.

When he looked at the drawing paper, Ning Ning was looking at him. Like how he was observing her earlier, Ning Ning also observed his expressions and movements...

"Take another look." Wen Yu put down the brush, added a few strokes on the drawing then asked, "Did the person you see on the attic look like this?"

Ning Ning looked at the drawing paper then shuddered.

It was clearly still the harmless rabbit mask, but for some reason, staring at the drawing for a period of time would make a person's hair stand on its end. That mask seemed to be smiling, it looked like it would draw out a bloodied knife from behind its back at the next second.

Wen Yu's few strokes inserted the soul of a murderer into the rabbit mask in the drawing.

Looking at the drawing, Ning Ning could not help but ask, "Did Madam Qin really commit suicide?"

Wen Yu shook his head, "No."

Ning Ning's heart thumped.

"She could not endure the criticism of people, so she committed suicide...that was what was told to outsiders." Wen Yu laughed. "After all, there is no other more scientific way to explain it."

"But what actually happened?" Ning Ning asked.

"In truth..." Wen Yu gazed at her deeply. "Do you believe a person could choke themselves to death?"

Madam Qin was the number one suspect in a murder case, she was immediately taken into custody.

There was no second suspect.

The "man in a rabbit mask" she was talking about did not exist at all.

Madam Qin's family started to go all over the place to look for proof that she had a mental illness. But in reality, in the eyes of her cellmates in prison, she definitely had some issues.

No matter day or night, she would fight with the air, she would even punch or kick the air.

"Three nights ago, Madam Qin fought with the air again." Wen Yu said, "Due to the fact that she had been doing that frequently, all her cellmates were already used to it, they would at most shout at her a few times, then tossed about and continued to sleep. Someone heard her cry for help in the middle of the night, but no one paid any heed, they only scolded her for being overdramatic in their hearts." Wen Yu slowly said, "The next day, they discovered that she laid on her bed with her eyes wide open, her corpse had already gone cold."

Forensics certified that she was strangled to death.

Who strangled her to death?

A group of people watched the CCTV recording, they felt more chills as they watched.

Within the recording, Madam Qin first scolded the air loudly.

As she was scolding the air, she started to use her hands and legs, repeatedly reaching out to grab the other party, her ferocious look was no different from a shrew in the market.

"If there was really a person standing in front of her, then it must be a really nice person," someone said as they watched, "they didn't retaliate even if they were getting beaten up and scolded."

In the end, at the next instant, Madam Qin looked like she was ferociously slapped, spinning halfway around like a top.

She used her hand to cover her face, then shouted out again. A person who could lip read interpreted what she said in that moment, "I would rather die to be together with him than to be together with a bastard like you!"

Afterwards, something that made the audience feel chills down their spines happened.

Madam Qin suddenly started to move backward.

There was clearly not a soul in front of her, but it looked like someone had pushed her, she retreated all the way back to the wall from where she was originally standing .

Then, her feet suddenly left the ground.

"Help...help me..." Madam Qin—with her back to the wall—had both her hands firmly in front of her neck, her feet that were off the ground kicked in front of her in a disorderly manner.

A cellmate seemed to have been woken up by the noise, turning around on the bed. Madam Qin looked at her with a pair of bloodshot eyes, full of hope.

Yet, as the cellmate turned around, she pressed a pillow on her head. Not long later, snores rang out.

Madam Qin's head drooped down.

Her hands were no longer struggling, her legs were no longer kicking.

She was like a painting, hanging on the wall silently...strangled and nailed to the wall by a pair of invisible hands.

Ning Ning could feel chills just from listening to the story, let alone those who had actually watched the footage.

"Her ex-husband did it?" Ning Ning folded her arms and rubbed the goosebumps on them. "Why did he do that?"

"It might be a moment of impulse, it might also be because he had reached the limits of his patience." Wen Yu said, "No matter what, you are in serious danger now."

"Me?" Ning Ning said in surprise. How did she get dragged into this?

"Killing his own wife had caused a huge change in his mental state," Wen Yu said, "simply put, he has completed the process of turning from an ordinary person into a serial killer."

"Serial...killer??" Hearing this phrase in reality—not from a show or a novel—Ning Ning simply felt that it was unimaginable. It felt so distant that it was a little surreal for her.

"This Mr. Rabbit—let's call him Mr. Rabbit for the time being," Wen Yu looked at the drawing on the table from the corner of his eye, "in Madam Qin's eyes—in the eyes of the world—he is already dead, but he doesn't admit that he is dead. He thinks that he had only been away for a long time, coming back to discover that his wife was together with another man. He killed her lover in a fit of rage, but he did not kill Madam Qin. He thought Madam Qin would feel guilty and thankful to him, but it was not what he had imagined in the end."

There seemed to be a bit of a commotion outside, what happened?

"I would rather die to be together with him than to be together with a bastard like you.' This sentence was the straw that broke the camel's back, he finally couldn't take it anymore and killed Madam Qin. Moreover, he does not think he is in the wrong." Wen Yu said, "He thinks Madam Qin was the one who was wrong—along with those similar to Madam Qin."

"Ning Ning, are you in there?" Chen Shuang He's voice rang out outside along with frantic knockings at the door.

Ning Ning could not help but sit up from the sofa. She had rarely seen him that agitated, did something happen outside?

"Ning Ning? Ning Ning!" No one had answered so Chen Shuang He knocked even louder. At the same time, Ning Ning's phone rang.

She first walked over in a hurry to open the door that Wen Yu had locked.

Chen Shuang He's frantic face appeared in front of her, sizing her up before breathing a sigh of relief. "Good to see that you're fine."

There was chaos outside, Ning Ning could not help but ask, "What happened?"

Chen Shuang He hesitated and looked into the room.

"He's on our side, you can say it." Ning Ning said.

"...The makeup artist who fell," Chen Shuang He lowered his voice and said to her, "she's dead...she was strangled to death."

Ning Ning quickly looked towards Wen Yu.

Wen Yu remained seated on the sofa, the tea in front of him had already gone cold.

For some reason, he seemed overly cautious today. He did not eat anything that he did not know the origins of, he did not even take a sip of the tea that had been served to him.

Seeing Ning Ning look at him, he smiled faintly, a smile that even felt a little grim.

"The characteristic of a serial killer is a set pattern," he said with a smile, "a set pattern of motives, a set pattern of a murder methods, or a set pattern of murder targets."

Ning Ning swallowed her saliva.

"Mr. Rabbit belongs to the last type, he picks victims of a similar type." Wen Yu told Ning Ning, "Madam Qin and the makeup artist from your set, what do you think they have in common?"

Ning Ning stared at him for a while before she slowly said, "...We are all a masked person's lover."

Lover.

That was such a gentle term, such a beautiful term, it was even a term that many people pursue for their whole lives.

But now it had become a life threatening term.

"...What are you two talking about?" Chen Shuang He looked at Ning Ning then at Wen Yu, "Who's a...serial killer?"

"This." Wen Yu handed the drawing over to him, then he gave him a simplified explanation.

The knot on Chen Shuang He's forehead got tighter and tighter. He finally crushed the drawing and stuffed it in his pocket, turned around and told Ning Ning, "I'll go tell my father, you should go back for the day, it's not safe here."

"It's no use," Wen Yu objected, "it's even more dangerous alone. Why not look for him while the matter has not blown up? Catch him, the sooner the better."

"Just with the few of us?" Chen Shuang He looked at him with surprise.

"No," Wen Yu said with a smile, "just me."

Chen Shuang He became speechless for a moment. "Forget it, count me in."

"Sure." Wen Yu said immediately, "I suspect Mr. Rabbit is still at the crime scene, you should go take a look, but only take a look. We'll go over the details after you get back, remember not to expose yourself."

...I was just being courteous and now you are starting to give me orders?
Chen Shuang He looked at him, dumbstruck, before he said in a muffled voice, "...Alright, I'll go over and take a look."

After he left, the rest area was left with just Ning Ning and Wen Yu again.

"Why?" Ning Ning suddenly asked.

Wen Yu turned to look at her.

"Why can you be so sure..." Ning Ning also slowly looked around, "that both of us had seen the masked person, the same masked person."

Previously when Wen Yu got her to draw the masked person, she had not realised it yet.

Afterward, when Wen Yu was editing the drawing for her, she felt that something was off, but she could not point it out at that moment.

Now she had finally realised it...

"Wen Yu," Ning Ning stared straight at the other party's face, asking word by word, "since when...have you been able to see masked people?"

Chapter 164

164: I Am Not Your Enemy

The corpse of the makeup artist laid on the floor, her eyes wide open.

A shirt was slowly laid on her, covering her body.

Chen Shuang He half squatted down and slowly pulled the shirt up to her face, covering her eyes that had died with regrets. Whispers rang out from the onlookers behind him.

"Come to think of it, haven't you been here all this while?"

"What are you trying to say, you suspect that I'm the murderer?"

"No, no, I just wanted to ask if you've seen the murderer."

"I didn't see anything...why are you looking at me like that! I really didn't see anything!"

Chen Shuang He remained squatting on the ground, observing the feet nearby.

After the murder, the people in the crew started to group up together—either due to fear or to have a discussion—the feet were grouped up together, only one pair of feet was the exception.

Chen Shuang He slowly stood up, his eyes naturally shifted up from that pair of feet to the person's face.

A rabbit mask.

"Run?" Not many people could remain truly calm when facing an enthusiastic serial killer, the thought of running away seemed to immediately appear in Chen Shuang He's heart, he quickly dispelled the thought. "No, he might not have seen me yet. Even if he has, he might not want to kill me. Calm down, I have to calm down..."

Chen Shuang He was worthy of his movie emperor title. His eyes scanned the other party's face, then he acted as if nothing happened and turned around without changing his expression. He shouted out for people to give way as he made his way through the crowd, then took out his phone and gave Ning Ning a call.

"Hello, it's me," he said in the call, "you two can come over now,

he..."

Chen Shuang He suddenly looked back.

Rabbit Mask was standing right behind him.

Set of < <Phantom of the Theater> >, at the rest area.

"Despair, paranoia, unreconciliation and having delusions of wanting to change your own fate—the only ones who could see masked people are these people." Ning Ning stared at the familiar face in front of her. "Which one do you belong to?"

"I don't belong to any of them." Wen Yu started to laugh. "Ning Ning, I cannot see masked people."

Ning Ning furrowed her brows, she found it hard to believe him.

If he truly could not see them, then how could one explain the Mr. Rabbit he drew?

Her phone suddenly rang, interrupting what Ning Ning had wanted to say.

Caller ID: Chen Shuang He.

"Hello?" Ning Ning answered the call.

"Hello, it's me," Chen Shuang He said, "you two can come over now, he... Ah!"

"...What happened? Hello? Hello!" Ning Ning's face turned green as she looked at the phone. She looked at Wen Yu and said, "Something's wrong, we should go over quickly."

The two of them rushed out of the rest area and walked towards the room that housed the makeup artist's corpse.

As they were making their way over there, the members of the crew rushed over like refugees running away from a natural disaster.

Ning Ning grabbed one of them and asked, "What happened? Why is everyone running away?"

"There's a monster, a ghost..." the other party tried to break free of Ning Ning's hand as he babbled, "something invisible started a fight with Chen Shuang He."

Ning Ning was stunned. The other party took the chance to break free of her hand, stumbling as he rushed back into the wave of refugees beside them.

The wave was moving towards them, not only did it sweep him up, it also swept Ning Ning up, making Ning Ning start to retreat uncontrollably.

Her phone rang again,

Caller ID: Chen Shuang He.

"Hello?" Ning Ning frantically answered the phone, "We're coming, are you alright?"

"..." The other side remained silent for a while, then an unfamiliar male voice rang out, "He's fine."

Ning Ning was rooted to the spot.

That voice was so close to her, it even had the hint of an echo.

She slowly looked back.

A man wearing a rabbit mask was standing behind her, he held Chen Shuang He's phone and said to her, "You are not."

"Ah!!" Ning Nin screamed. In the next second, an arm grabbed her neck and pulled her behind a person.

"Is it him?" Wen Yu stood in front of her, looking straight in front of himself, asking in a low voice, "Where is he? Point him out for me."

Ning Ning was taken aback. It was already such a juncture in time, he could not have been acting... So, he really couldn't see masked people? Ning Ning said frantically, "Right side! Right side! He's coming for you from your right side, watch out... Ah!"

Her prompts were not as fast as Mr. Rabbit's movements.

Ning Ning could only watch as Mr. Rabbit jumped Wen Yu, both his hands reaching out to strangle him.

Wen Yu could not see masked people, his eyes were still looking in another direction, but his right hand was raised up, a dining knife was raised horizontally in front of the other's neck.

"Ah!!" Now, it was Mr. Rabbit who was the one screaming.

He had pounced too ferociously, but Wen Yu had blocked at just the right time. Both of Mr. Rabbit's hands were slashed, black tape flowed out from the wounds.

Mr. Rabbit bent his back, his hands trembling, wails of pain rang out behind the mask, but he did not give up. He circled the two of them repeatedly, the black tape from his hands flowing to the floor.

"Continue," Wen Yu said, "point out where he is to me."

"He's here." Ning Ning pointed at Mr. Rabbit, her finger pointing to wherever he walked to like a shadow.

Mr. Rabbit roared angrily and pounced on her.

"He's coming to me... Ah!" Ning Ning's voice just petered out as a dining knife was held horizontally in front of her neck.

Mr. Rabbit screamed again. He was injured again, he was injured on the same place too, he could not help but take a few steps back, he looking at Wen Yu with hatred and doubt, "...Can you really not see me?"

Wen Yu smiled without saying a word, his vision was still not on Mr. Rabbit.

But Mr. Rabbit was unwilling to fall for it again! He shouted in pain, "You're a liar, an actor! You can clearly see me but you're still acting like you can't! I won't fall for it again!"

He shouted as he opened the door, then turned around and ran.

Ning Ning waited for a moment. Seeing that Wen Yu had no reaction, she asked anxiously, "He's running, are we not chasing him?"

"Why don't you say so earlier?" Wen Yu immediately reacted, "Which direction did he run to?"

Wen Yu chased after the other for a while with Ning Ning's guidance. Unfortunately, Mr Rabbit injured his hands, not feet, there were a lot of people around too on top of that, they lost him in the end.

"It can't be helped." Wen Yu put the dining knife back into his pocket as he said with some regret, "Although we can't catch him, the good thing is that we injured him, he won't be able to harm anyone for a while... Let's go, we should go back and check up on Chen Shuang He."

"Okay." Ning Ning answered, the two of them started to walk down the empty long corridor. Halfway through, Ning Ning hesitated and asked the figure in front of her, "How did you do it?"

Wen Yu, "The neck."

"...Huh?"

"Mr. Rabbit is a serial killer, the method he uses to kill is fixed—to strangle a person's neck until the person stops breathing." Wen Yu said

with his back to her, "Knowing where he will attack makes dealing with him very easy."

"How do you know everything..." Ning Ning murmured at him, "including what he looks like, the way he attacks..."

Wen Yu stopped in his tracks. He slowly turned around and looked at her.

"Seven years later, everyone knows who he is." Wen Yu looked down at her, "It's not just him, the government had a file on every dangerous masked person. They did not only have portraits, they even had their individual methods of killing. Even children can recite their data, not to mention me."

"...What are you talking about?" Ning Ning held her forehead, "Wait a minute, I'm a little bit confused now, what you're saying is..."

She stared at the unfamiliar yet familiar face in front of her as she murmured, "Are you...from the future?"

"Yes," Wen Yu admitted calmly, "I am from the future."

"Then you..." Ning Ning hesitated for a moment, "are really Wen Yu?"

The calmness that was close to unfeeling on his face cracked, showing a dejected and bitter smile, he nodded, "It's me... Aunt Xiao Ning."

"You...changed so much." Ning Ning could not help but touch his face, as if she was touching his worn out soul through his young face. "Is the situation in the future that bad? Masked people like Mr. Rabbit...are there a lot of them?"

"Yes." Wen Yu bent over slightly, opening up his tired soul to her, he said in a low voice, "There are a lot of them..."

He described the strange future to Ning Ning with an insipid tone.

Seven years later, masked people were no longer the minority.

Normal people became the minority.

Furthermore, their numbers continued to dwindle, they were either killed by masked people or tricked into entering the movie theater by masked people.

"The mainstream view of the future was that masked people are also people. People would get lonely, so they want to increase their numbers." Wen Yu said, "It was fine at first, but after a certain incident

in a certain year, the masked people started their expansion plans. When it got to 2025—the year I came from—the number of masked people had already exceeded normal people, moreover, their numbers were increasing by the year... For the sake of turning the situation around, the government and the people started a lot of research..."

The opponent was something which couldn't be seen with the naked eye, they didn't even show up on machines.

What was even worse was that these people wouldn't die.

As long as Life Theater existed, they would not age nor die. Even if they were blown into pieces with a cannon, they would just turn back into a mask, hung on the wall in the projection room. As time went by, the humans buried in the ground would turn into withered bones, the masks hung on the wall would turn back into masked people.

It was a completely unfair battle.

It made even more normal people feel despair, it even caused the thoughts of "If I'm going to die, why not turn into a masked person".

"At the end of the research, they came up with a conclusion." Wen Yu said, "Life Theater...we must go back to the beginning of the entire incident through Life Theater, then change everything at the source."

"Source?" Ning Ning asked, "You're referring to Mr. Rabbit?"

Wen Yu shook his head, "No...he is only one of the people from the incident."

Ning Ning was shocked, "There are others?"

She wanted to pursue the matter, but she couldn't bring it up.

Because Wen Yu was looking at her with an expression that was hard to describe. That expression was so familiar yet unfamiliar, intimate yet hateful, full of pity and remorse.

"...Who is it?" After half an instant, Ning Ning finally asked him, her voice sounded a little bitter, "Who else is among the masked people that were placed on file?"

Wen Yu took a deep breath, he seemed to be unwilling to answer the question, thus he started to speak indirectly, "Through a series of data, we finally found the source. The source was the year <<Phantom of the Theater>> was filmed, it was news which rocked the world. First, a makeup artist died of an accident, but the culprit was never found..."

"Who is it?" Ning Ning vaguely had an answer in her heart, she

interrupted Wen Yu and held his hand forcefully, fixing his eyes on him.

His drifting eyes were fixed on Ning Ning. Wen Yu seemed to be looking at her, but he also seemed to be looking at another person far away. After a long period of time, he quietly spat out two words.

"...It's you."

Everything around them seemed to have fallen silent. Ning Ning stood on the spot as if she had turned into stone, looking at the person in front of her, listening to him using an extremely low voice to tell her, "After <<Phantom of the Theater>> ended, you turned into a masked person. The evaluation the later generations gave you was that—hell started from you."

You were the leader of all the masked people.

You were the most dangerous masked person on record.

You were my enemy...all of our enemy.

"Me?" Ning Ning pointed at herself, forcing a laugh. "You gotta be kidding. A person like me could be the leader of all the masked people? I'm even the most dangerous masked person? I...was just being hunted by Mr. Rabbit...."

She babbled on her explanation for a very long time before she finally sighed, reaching out to hug him.

"I don't like to harm others, I don't want to be friends with Mr. Rabbit either. Will I change in the future? I don't know. But I can guarantee you one thing." Ning Ning leaned on Wen Yu's chest. Rather than describing it as her trying to draw warmth from him by relying on him, it would be more accurate to say that she was trying to let this ice cold soul rely on her, to draw warmth from her. "....I will never ever hurt you. Wen Yu, I am not your enemy."

Chapter 165

165: Red and White

"Or is it that..." Ning Ning asked, "you're actually here to kill me?"

Wen Yu looked down at her without speaking.

"Compared to Mr. Rabbit, I'm the better choice, right?" Ning Ning slowly looked up at him. "After all, Mr. Rabbit is only one of the masked people, but I'm the leader of all the masked people."

Wen Yu did not admit it, but he didn't retort either.

But with Ning Ning's understanding, his silence in the moment meant an acknowledgement.

"But you can't do it." Ning Ning smiled at him.

As she finished saying that, her neck suddenly felt cold.

A dining knife was put up horizontally to her neck.

"If I kill you now, you won't be the Ning Ning from my memory." Wen Yu held the knife handle, he seemed to be explaining to Ning Ning, he also seemed to be talking to himself, "Then you won't make so many mistakes, you would not become what you were like in the future."

The dining knife being held up to her neck had a trace of coldness.

Ning Ning glanced down, that's strange, how did she not feel any fear?

Thinking briefly about it, she understood now.

A trusting look was cast upon Wen Yu, Ning Ning said gently, "You can't do it."

Wen Yu, "..."

"I understand you, just like how I will never harm you, you will also never harm me." Ning Ning raised her hand, "The proof is right here."

Her gentle fingers were like the spring wind as it caressed his eyes.

"You can't even see masked people even now." Ning Ning laughed, "It proves that you still have hope in your heart."

The slowly falling finger pressed down on his chest, she asked quietly, "...The belief that made you hold on till now, is it really to kill me?"

The heart that was silent to the point where it was like it stopped beating, in that moment it suddenly started to beat violently.

"A lot of people think that this is a type of flaw." Wen Yu said blandly, "In the future, only children who are barely a few years old could not see masked people. Not being able to see masked people would mean not being able to deal with or escape from masked people, so their parents would force them to be able to see...I'm probably the last person who cannot see masked people..."

He looked down at his chest, looking at the hand that was pressing down on his chest, he suddenly let out a bitter laugh. He held Ning Ning's hand with both hands, slowly shifting her hand to his own forehead.

"The reason is most probably as you said." He bent over slightly, placing his forehead to her finger in an almost devout manner, like an angel shining a light on their believer, he closed his eyes and smiled bitterly. "The hope in my heart remains. I came here for you, I came here for the future of humans, I want to save you, I want to save everyone, so..."

He opened his eyes to look at Ning Ning as he said with an extremely imposing tone, "I have to find the reason you turned into a masked person!"

At the same time, at a certain road junction.

"Huff, huff, huff..."

Mr. Rabbit ran breathlessly, he stopped in his tracks halfway through and looked back.

Seeing that Wen Yu did not catch up, he breathed a sigh of relief. A piercing white light suddenly shone on the side of his face, he reflexively raised a hand to block it, in the next second...

"Bang!!"

A BMW stopped by the road, the car window was wound down. A head peeked out from the inside, looking out the window as they trembled in fear. "It's over, it's over, I think I knocked someone down."

"No way?" The female passenger shouted out, then the doors on both sides opened. Both of them got off and circled around the car once. In the end, they breathed a sigh of relief at the same time, the

female passenger gave a pat to the car owner. "Good thing there's no one, you gave me such a fright!"

"There...there's someone..." Mr. Rabbit who was knocked to the side of the road could not get up. He reached out with a trembling hand towards them as he shouted with his dying breath.

The BMW left him in the dust, the dust made him cough as they were kicked off.

"Help me..." After a few strips of black tape were coughed out, Mr. Rabbit continued to shout with his dying breath, "I'm about to die, help me..."

There were benefits to being a masked person—when they kill someone, no one would know or be able to see.

But there was also a downside—when they were getting killed, no one would know or be able to see either.

Mr. Rabbit wailed mournfully on the ground for half an hour or so, but it was in the middle of the night, there were not many pedestrians to begin with, those few pedestrians could not see him nor hear him.

One of them stepped on Mr. Rabbit's hand. Mr. Rabbit whose hand was already heavily injured screamed, "Ah!"

"Ah!" The pedestrian also screamed. She jumped about and said, "Ew, it feels like I just stepped on something soft. Ah! So gross, so scary, we should leave quickly!"

Bitch, I have to kill you in the future...

The serial killer on his last breath swore in his heart. Then, bringing his hatred for this world along with his hatred for women, closed his eyes unwillingly...

"Wow..." A pleasant male voice rang out from the top of his head, "How did you end up in such a bad state?"

Mr. Rabbit opened his eyes.

Shi Zhong Tang squatted beside him. He tilted his head and looked at him, winking his right eye in a slightly playful manner. "Do you need help? If so, shout 'one'."

"One, one, one, one, one, one!!!"

Shi Zhong Tang piggybacked him to a small clinic.

Mr. Rabbit took a look at the signboard—Compassion Veterinary Clinic.

"...I want to go to a regular hospital!" Mr. Rabbit said in rage, "You can't bring me to a vet just because I'm wearing a rabbit mask!"

"You want the doctor of a regular hospital to operate on air?" Shi Zhong Tang shook his head, then started knocking on the door, "It's me, Shi Zhong Tang, open up."

Mr. Rabbit wanted to tell him not to waste his breath, he himself shouted for half an hour by the road to no avail.

In the next second, the door opened.

Mr. Rabbit, "..."

The person behind the door was also a masked person, a cry of surprise rang out from the cat mask that was very fitting for a vet, "Oh my, what a poor bunny, quickly bring him in here."

"...What do you mean by bunny, this man is already forty! Also, this man does not want to visit a vet!"

Although Mr. Rabbit tried his best to protest, he was tranquilised and put on a pet hospital bed...

Either he was not fated to die, or Cat Mask had amazing skills. After the rescue attempt, his injuries actually gradually stabilised.

When Mr. Rabbit opened his eyes once again, his body and fingers were all bandaged up, his wounds were not bleeding the limited black tape anymore.

"Tell me." A voice rang out from the bedside. He looked over and saw Shi Zhong Tang standing by the bed, the cat masked person sitting on the chair by the bed, gently petting a white cat that was lying on their knees.

"What happened to you?" Shi Zhong Tang asked. "It's one thing to be knocked down by a car, how did your hands get slashed? Who did it?"

Mr. Rabbit stared at him, he did not dare to tell the truth.

"This fellow is helping me now because he doesn't know I targeted his girlfriend. Once he finds out..." Mr. Rabbit thought, "Hold on, does he know something? Otherwise, why did he bring me to the vet?"

He speculated about Shi Zhong Tang's intentions maliciously, him being a bad guy made him believe that the other party must also be a bad guy.

"...I accidentally knocked over the shelf that was holding knives

when I was stealing food." Mr. Rabbit found a random excuse. "When it rains, it pours. Later on, I was knocked down by a car as well. Neither heaven nor earth was answering my pleas, if not for you passing by, sigh..."

"Count your lucky stars. My girlfriend has to work overtime tonight, I am here to fetch her home." Shi Zhong Tang smiled as he asked, "That's right, how are things between you and your wife?"

Mr. Rabbit fell silent for a moment before he smiled. "Same old. She lives her life, I live mine. How can I compare to you? Your girlfriend knows that you are a masked person, yet she insists on being with you... Seriously, I'm so envious of you."

Rather than envy, it would be more accurate to call it jealousy.

He was so jealous that he wanted to swap life with him.

Shi Zhong Tang could not help but let out a laugh, just as he was about to say something, footsteps rang out from the floor above.

The three of them looked up at the same time. The footsteps stopped at the top of the stairs, but no one came down.

But the voices of a man and a woman rang out.

"How is it, dear? Is there anyone downstairs?"

"There's no one..."

"Then why are the lights on? Did you forget to switch them off when you closed the shop today?"

"Impossible..."

A man and a woman walked down the stairs, the woman hid behind the man, he was even holding a golf club to give himself courage.

The ears of the cat on Cat Mask's lap moved. She opened her eyes to take a look, abruptly jumping off the legs and running towards the couple as it meowed.

"Little Cutie, are you hungry?" The woman stepped out from behind the man, bending down to pick the cat up. Her fingers stroked its chin, causing the cat to close its eyes in comfort. She teased the cat as she ordered the man by her side, "Go, go, make something for Little Cutie to eat."

The cat mask sighed faintly as she looked towards the cat. "My man has a new owner, my cat also has a new owner."

That was the famous cat slave in Life Theater.

Compared to men, she cared about cats more.

She quit her job for cats, she opened a veterinarian clinic for cats, she married very late in life for cats, she refused to give birth to children for cats, and finally, she turned into a famous masked person for saving her cat from under the wheels. After she escaped from the movie theater, she hurried home without stopping to look for her cat.

It didn't matter that her man had a change of heart, what made her feel downhearted was that her cat had a change of heart.

"They are all the same." Mr. Rabbit related to her, patting her shoulders as consolation, his voice had a trace of grievance, "No matter if it's a man, a woman or a cat, they are all the same. Just because we have a mask on our faces, they would not treat us as a person. To put it frankly, they are all giving themselves an excuse for their change of heart."

Shi Zhong Tang looked back at him, "Not everyone is like that."

Mr. Rabbit burned with anger. He hated normal people, he hated a blissful masked person like Shi Zhong Tang even more. Shi Zhong Tang did not need to do anything besides stand there to make him feel ashamed of his own unseemliness.

He could not help as his shame turned into anger, he shouted, "Stop being sarcastic! You think everyone is as lucky as you? Most of the masked people are living their lives like me, lonely and helpless, no one cares about us. I gave her my everything, she instead fed my everything to the dogs..."

"Alright, alright, this is someone else's house, what are you getting so agitated for?" Shi Zhong Tang could not be bothered to argue with him, he waved to Cat Mask. "I'll go ahead and fetch my girlfriend, if you can't stay here I can introduce a place for you."

His disregard made Mr. Rabbit even more annoyed. Just as he was about to continue scolding him, he was suddenly taken aback and started laughing.

Shi Zhong Tang did not care about his scoldings, he was curious to why he was laughing instead. He tilted his head and asked, "What are you laughing about?"

"Haha, hahahaha..." Mr. Rabbit was tearing up from laughter, it even flared up his injury. He trembled from the pain, but even so, he was still laughing, he was laughing for Shi Zhong Tang to see.

"Life Theater is still quite fair it seems, you're not so lucky." Mr. Rabbit pointed to what was behind Shi Zhong Tang. "Look."

Shi Zhong Tang raised his eyebrows before he looked back.

Behind him was a mirror.

Looking at his reflection in the mirror, Shi Zhong Tang murmured, "How is this possible..."

He gave the top of his head a tug.

Then he slowly opened up his hand.

On it, was a handful of black and white hair.

Chapter 166

166: Never Lonely

Someone claimed that the movie < <Phantom of the Theater> > was most probably cursed, or maybe it was Director Chen who was cursed.

It led to death both times.

Moreover it was even more supernatural this time.

The murderer this time was actually an invisible person.

The police came over to investigate, the crew had to stop work for a day. Ning Ning and Wen Yu took this chance to visit a place together—Compassion Veterinary Clinic.

"Although there are many wanted masked people in the future, there are not many worth mentioning." Wen Yu said from behind Ning Ning, "I call the one in here Madam Cat, she is the doctor in your team, your best friend, and brain trust at the same time."

Ning Ning looked at the veterinary shop in front of her and felt a little intrigued.

She had 'friends', most of them were business friends, she did not have many friends in life.

Due to the fact that she was too busy with work, even if she had a few friends, they would not be in contact frequently, so their relationships gradually faded.

The person behind the door was her future best friend?

"You call her Madam Cat because she wears a cat mask?" Ning Ning asked curiously, "What kind of person is she? Why did she become my best friend? Oh that's right, she works at a veterinary shop, is there no one else among the masked people? Why did they let a vet become the doctor of the team?"

"She was a doctor all along, she had an outstanding contribution to biological evolution." Wen Yu said, "The reason she quit her original job to open a veterinary shop...was because she likes cats."

They opened the door and entered, the wind chime above the door rang out crisply.

"Welcome."

The parrot on the shelf shouted welcome repeatedly, but no staff came to greet them all the while.

That was strange. Was no one around? The door clearly had an open sign.

"Hello, is anyone there?" Ning Ning shouted as she walked in.

She walked up to the operating room. The door in front of her was unlocked, there were several sounds from the inside, it sounded like someone was operating on an animal.

She knocked on the door, "Hello?"

The unlocked door opened a little from her knocking. Through the widening gap of the doorway, Ning Ning saw a man and woman still in shock. They were hugging each other, curling up in the corner of the room, their eyes were directed at the operating table.

What was over there?

Ning Ning poked her head in and looked at the operating table as well.

A scalpel was dancing in the air, a woman wearing a cat mask was performing a surgery on the leg of a cat on the operating table.

"Come here," she said without looking up, "give me a hand."

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment before she walked over.

"First, change your clothes, the first drawer behind me, don't forget the gloves."

Ning Ning pulled out the first drawer. She took out the scrubs and the face mask to change into, then wore the rubber gloves as she asked, "What's next?"

"Take this," Madam Cat gave the bloodied scalpel to her, "give me a pair of scissors."

The bloody scalpel and the bloody cat made Ning Ning feel a little faint. She took the scalpel as she hypnotised herself in her heart: acting, acting, I'm a nurse, I'm in a medical show...

She picked up the scissors and handed it to the other party.

This scene became the straw that broke the camel's back. The man and woman curling up in the corner seemed to lose their nerves, they screamed, "Ah!!!"

Ning Ning's hand flinched from their screams, the scissors fell to the floor.

"Be careful." Madam Cat complained.

"I'm sorry." Ning Ning quickly picked up the scissors then switched to another pair in a hurry.

The man and woman screamed as they rushed out of the room. Wen Yu, who was about to enter the room, frantically turned his body sideways so that he wouldn't bump into the two of them.

After watching the two of them escape, Wen Yu looked back and was taken aback. "What are you doing?"

"I'm helping." Ning Ning moved frantically. "I cannot do this alone, come and help out too. That's right, the clothes are in the first drawer."

Wen Yu walked over and pulled out the first drawer, he looked down at the blue and white scrubs along with the surgical masks in the drawer, then slowly looked back. He looked at Ning Ning with a complicated expression, "Are you helping Madam Cat?"

Ning Ning was taken aback. She looked over and stared at the cat mask beside her.

"We can talk later," Madam Cat continued to look down, "save the cat first."

The three of them worked together to finally finish the surgery.

"Alright," Madam Cat sat on a chair and sat with one leg crossed over the other, "what business do you two have with me?"

Clatter, clatter, clatter, clatter.

Ning Ning looked down.

A row of bowls was by her feet, snow white goat milk filled the bowls.

A row of kittens in an assortment of colours were burying their faces in the bowls, their tongues curled as they licked the milk.

...Wen Yu was not wrong, she really liked cats a lot...

"You two still have half an hour." Madam Cat took a look at the clock. "Half an hour later, I have to go feed Xiao Bai some medicine."

"Is it the one that just had a surgery?" Ning Ning asked.

"Yes," Madam Cat had a gentle expression, "It is an old cat, these are its children."

Ning Ning thought about it before she asked, "Were the people who just escaped the owners of this shop? You scared them."

"So what?" Madam cat bent down and touched a kitten's neck.

"They will return." Ning Ning sighed, "How are they going to react to these cats at your feet?"

The better Madam Cat treated cats, the more the couple who owned the shop got mad at these cats. They even thought that the cats were the ones that lured Madam Cat into their house. For the sake of chasing Madam Cat out, they might even chase these cats out.

"You're talking about them?" Madam Cat let out a cold laugh. "That dumb woman, she actually gave her leftover milk from breakfast for the kittens. How could the kittens drink that? They would have diarrhoea after drinking that. The man is also dumb. He had only been my assistant for a few months, he didn't have any experience of doing surgeries on his own, but for the sake of saving cost on hiring a vet, he took it upon himself to do the surgeries, he really was treating their lives like dirt."

...This was most probably the legendary cat slave, she really could not stop talking about cats.

"But, you want to return to the movie theater, right?" Ning Ning asked.

"Who said that I want to go back there?" Madam Cat said with a smile, she picked up all the kittens into her arms as she gently said, "I have thought about it very carefully. Besides me, no one else can give them happiness... You tell me, why should I leave them to that pair of idiots?"

Her smile gradually turned cold, "Even if I were to leave, I will bring them along with me!"

The kitten meowed in her arms, struggling as it tried to leave, but she hugged it firmly, she would not let it go no matter what. A paranoid laughter rang out from behind the cat mask, "Compared to those two idiots, I...masked people are more splendid! Masked people are definitely the evolution of humans! We don't need to eat, don't need to sleep, the time saved can be used for scientific research, self-improvement, it can also be used to accompany my lovable cats... Even if my most beloved Xiao Bai dies, I can accompany its children, they will never be lonely, I will also never be lonely..."

As she said that, she suddenly shot a strange look at Ning Ning, asking with a smile, "That's right, last night, did Shi Zhong Tang go fetch you?"

Life Theater.

Although it was the day, the inside of the theater was still shrouded in darkness.

A person sat among the audience seats, he was bent over, both his hands were on his face, like a tired person pretending to sleep.

"What time is it?" He suddenly asked.

Whispers rang out from the darkness, one of the voices answered, "It's four in the afternoon."

After a moment of silence, that person stood up from the chair, he murmured to himself, "I should go back, she would go around looking for me."

He started walking towards the entrance. Behind him, countless figures spoke from within the darkness, men and women, old and young, their voices undulated as they tried to persuade him.

"Shi Zhong Tang, stop."

"You cannot go out."

"Come back quickly."

"Be careful..."

Shi Zhong Tang's footsteps were heavy, they were that of a person walking in a desert, little by little trudging towards the entrance.

He had finally trudged up to the entrance, looking up and seeing a masked person from across the street running towards the theater with all his might.

That was a masked person with a ponytail that had already lost half his head of hair, he was wearing a book boy mask and dressed up as a person from the Qing dynasty.

The traffic light at the junction suddenly turned green, cars immediately drove by like the ocean, separating the street and Life Theater.

The Qing Dynasty person retreated in fear from the cars. He looked at the traffic lights anxiously, the ponytail behind him gradually turned from black to white.

There was no time left!

Without waiting for the traffic light to turn red, the Qing Dynasty person ran rapidly towards the movie theater. He was almost knocked down by a car a few times, he was so scared that he was covered in sweat and his legs were jelly. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks and looked at the big truck that was driving towards him at breakneck speed...

Boom...

The big truck sounded like thunder as it drove over the spot the Qing Dynasty person was standing on.

"Huff...huff..." Beside the truck, Shi Zhong Tang held the Qing Dynasty person tightly, sweat rolling off his forehead. He said with lingering fear, "That was close...are you alright?"

He looked down at the masked person he saved.

He did not get any response for a long time.

The white ponytail, the hand that was full of wrinkles, the smell of a decadent old man...

He died of old age.

Shi Zhong Tang looked at the masked person in his arms who had died of old age. He was speechless for a very long time, until the other party's body slowly rotted into a pile of black tape on the ground, with a clank, the book boy mask fell on the ground.

"You will turn old as well if you don't come back." A voice that was taking pleasure in his misfortune rang out behind him.

Shi Zhong Tang slowly looked back.

A meter away from him, Mr. Rabbit stood at the doorway of Life Theater, looking at him with a slightly mocking expression as he said, "Although the theater restricts your freedom, it stops your aging, otherwise..."

He started laughing viciously. He pointed at the book boy mask on the ground, along with the white ponytail that had not fully rotted away. "You think she will still like you when you have turned this old, you think she will still look forward to your return?"

Shi Zhong Tang fell silent for a moment, he picked up the book boy mask then slowly walked back into the theater.

In the quiet theater, without light or warmth, a darkness with only

masks floating about, pale and cold.

"Ha..." Shi Zhong Tang looked at his surroundings and let out a laugh at himself, "I originally thought that this place was a prison, it is actually a freezer."

My love for you did not ail, but my body had started to.

Ning Ning...

Chapter 167

167: Life in the Morning, Death in the Evening

Tires screeched on the road, it was an ear piercing sound.

The car had yet to come to a complete stop, but the door opened, Ning Ning rushing out of it.

"Ning Ning, hold on..."

Wen Yu's voice rang out behind her further and further away.

"Huff, huff..." Ning Ning ran up the stairs maniacally.

There was a period of time where I hated going home a lot.

"Huff, huff..." She frantically took out her keys, due to her trembling hands, it took her a very long time before she managed to put the key in.

Because there was no one waiting for me at home, I had to eat alone, wash dishes alone, sit alone in the living room, no one would tell me to go to sleep even when the sun came up.

The door opened, Ning Ning rushed in without even taking off her shoes.

She left a trail of dirty footprints, staining the wooden floor in a crooked line, like the time when the mermaid princess had given up her tail for a pair of legs, leaving a trail of footprints on the beach.

Not in the living room, not in the bedroom, not on the balcony...

"Shi Zhong Tang..." Ning Ning stood in front of the balcony and murmured in a low voice at the setting sun.

"Here." Shi Zhong Tang's voice rang out behind her.

She was stunned, she looked back.

Shi Zhong Tang stood behind her. He was wearing her pink apron, in his hand was a little pot that was used to make soup, grinning. "To capture your heart, I plan to first capture your stomach... Hey, hey, don't come over here, it's very hot!"

Ning Ning had wanted to rush over and hug him, but the pot blocked her.

Shi Zhong Tang placed the pot on the table then opened up his arms, "Here."

"Hmph!" Ning Ning walked past him, took off the lid and drank the soup angrily.

"Hey—" Shi Zhong Tang turned his head, he dragged out his voice.

"Don't come here!" Acting like she was busy eating, Ning Ning scooped a spoonful of soup, her tears dropped onto the spoon.

"...Is my skill that good?" A pair of hands slowly reached out from behind her and hugged her, saying gently, "Is it so delicious that it makes you cry?"

"No, it's not." Ning Ning said stubbornly, "It's far off from my mama's..."

Mama's cooking would always be the best.

Because a person could only have that for the first half their life, not throughout their entire life.

For the rest of her life, whose cooking would she have? Most of the time she would have the bento from the crew, sometimes she would cook for herself, sometimes she would eat out, eating gradually became a type of work, a scheduled procedure required to survive.

She gradually became numb, she gradually stopped hoping—hoping that one day, a person would say: I'll cook for you for the rest of our lives.

"Heh heh, there's nothing I can do even if it's bad," Shi Zhong Tang said shamelessly, "my standards are that low, you better get used to it."

"For the rest of my life?" She clearly did not have hope anymore, why did her mouth say such a thing on its own? "If you were to cook for me for the rest of my life, I will get used to it from now on."

The arms wrapped around her waist suddenly stiffened.

"Ah...the rest of your life..." Shi Zhong Tang suddenly laughed. "The rest of your life is too long, let's just seize the day, alright?"

Ning Ning fell silent for a moment, she asked with a smile, "Are you saying that because your life is destined to be longer than mine?"

Shi Zhong Tang didn't say a word.

The two of them snuggled up to each other, the pot in front of them billowed with white smoke.

"You are a masked person, but me..." Ning Ning gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, I cannot be a masked person."

Footsteps approached them, it stopped in front of the two of them, Wen Yu stood at the doorway and watched the two of them quietly.

He did not say a word, but how could Ning Ning disappoint him?

The future he narrated would not come true? Ning Ning did not dare to guarantee that. She could only guarantee that she would not turn into a masked person out of her own will. This way, even if a leader appeared among the masked people, the leader would definitely not be her. She would not lead the masked people to do evil, turning the entire world into a chaotic and bloody stage, turning everyone into members of the stage.

But this would also mean that, as a human, she would not be able to be together with the masked person Shi Zhong Tang. She could only be in the first half of his life, not the second half of it.

"...Life is a countdown the moment you were born, I don't know how long I can live either." She could only turn around and give him such a promise. "If I can live for a hundred years, I would accompany you for a hundred years, if I can live for a hundred days, I would accompany you for a hundred days, if I can only live for a day, I will accompany you for this day..."

Shi Zhong Tang fixed his gaze on her.

Ning Ning felt her face get hot, it was not only from feeling shy, but it was also from guilt.

It was her who suggested a promise that would last forever, but she was the one who could not fulfill the promise at the end.

"That's right, I will turn old." She looked away as she stopped being demanding. "You will stop liking me at that time. I, too, don't want you to see the ugly and old me... Please leave me at that time, let me be alone..."

"Alright."

Ning Ning was taken aback, she looked back at him.

"Life in the Morning, Death in the Evening, I'll be together with you." Under such harsh conditions, Shi Zhong Tang accepted her promise with a smile. He also gave her a promise, "Even if it is only for a day."

However a human couldn't live with just love.

Food and shelter, getting married and having children, all of those require money. Besides a small portion of people who were born with a silver spoon, the others have to work hard like ants, so that they could give their loved ones and themselves a life.

Especially with a leader like Director Chen.

Ning Ning could only spend a tender day with her loved one before she was ordered back to the crew.

Director Chen's exact words were, "It doesn't matter if you have to save the world tomorrow, or if the world comes to an end, you have to finish filming this movie today!!"

< <Phantom of the Theater> > was also Director Chen's lover, he would give it his all to love it, if he could only live for a day, that day would be given to it.

"Next scene, get prepared." Director Chen had already lost so much weight that he was now beyond recognition, he covered his mouth with a handkerchief as he coughed. "*Cough*, begin!"

< <Phantom of the Theater> > was nearing the end of its filming.

As the male lead grew more and more popular, his need for the phantom grew less and less, he was gradually slipping out of her control.

Friction started to appear between the two of them.

The biggest cause of the friction was the male lead's suitor—a very passionate rich young lady who loved him with all her heart.

Although the phantom had warned him a few times, the male lead was soft, he did not have a decisive personality, so he had always maintained a lukewarm relationship with the rich young lady, not cutting her off completely. The rich young lady, on the other hand, was more of a bastard, she would not let go of him. She would attend every one of his shows, completely ignoring the gossip among the outsiders, it even got to the point where she became the joke among the circle of rich people in the capital.

It was hard to let down a beauty's grace. Although the male lead said that he did not feel anything towards her, he could not turn a blind eye towards her either.

Him treating her normally was mistaken as him being interested in her by the phantom. Jealousy rose in her heart, which in turn stoked her murderous intent. She almost killed the rich young lady, but the latter managed to get away due to a stroke of luck. However, this

caused the male lead to rage and a fierce fight broke out between the two of them.

"That woman is only playing you," Ning Ning said coldly with a superior demeanour, "just like how those young masters had played me."

It was night time again, it was the place they first met.

In the box seat of the theater, she wore her costume and a mask as she sat lazily on an old-fashioned wooden armchair. Chen Shuang He stood in front of her, his eyes no longer filled with adoration or blind devotion.

It was filled with rage instead, along with the pain of the image of his crumbling idol.

"...I have stayed in this theater for many years." Ning Ning paused for a moment, she was not used to the expression he was using to look at her, thus she spoke in a more gentle manner hoping that their relationship can be reconciled, "There were many talented performers who were tricked out of their hearts and bodies, the ones who managed to get married were few and far between, most of them were tossed to the side. What about you? You are more talented than any of them, you have the qualities to go down in history, do you also want to abandon yourself? To exchange your youth for money like them?"

"...Excuses!"

Ning Ning's smile stiffened.

"You claim that it's for my sake..." Chen Shuang He's chest undulated, his hands by the side of his body clenched tightly into balls of fist, he said with a little agitation, "But I have never told you to kill anyone!"

The smile completely disappeared from Ning Ning's face, she was no longer gentle nor compromising. She stared at Chen Shuang He with an ice cold expression, just like how she stared at others from hell. "Why didn't you say this when I killed the lead performer?"

Chen Shuang He was stunned.

"Why didn't you say this when I killed Dun Lan?" She asked again.

"I..." Chen Shuang He said with hesitation.

"Why didn't you say this when I killed the troupe leader?" Ning Ning laughed coldly. "Cat got your tongue? Let me tell you why."

She stood up from the old-fashioned wooden armchair, walking

towards Chen Shuang He step by step, the overwhelming pressure forcing Chen Shuang He to retreat step by step.

"You had the opportunity to make a name for yourself after the lead performer died. There was no one to play dirty tricks on you behind your back after Dun Lan died. There was no one to hold your "slave" contract, squeezing your earnings dry and trying to give you to powerful and rich old masters to gain their favour after the troupe leader died." Ning Ning forced Chen Shuang He into the corner step by step, with a bang, his back was against the wall.

"Shut up!" Chen Shuang He leaned on the wall, his eyes staring at her lips, as if extremely sharp knives were coming out of it instead of words.

"You benefited from their deaths, that's why you have nothing to say about them."

"That's not it!"

"You only want to enjoy the benefits I bring you." Ning Ning caressed his cheek lightly, his tears staining her fingers like a knife piercing her heart. She cracked a painful yet carefree smile, "...Such a convenient thing doesn't exist."

"...I didn't know that you killed anyone at all at the beginning!" Chen Shuang He roared suddenly. He shoved her hard, Ning Ning stumbled a few steps back. She felt exasperated. Just as she was about to mock him more, she saw that his face was filled with tears as he looked at her with a blank expression, murmuring, "I was certainly very jealous of the lead performer, hated Dun Lan and the troupe leader a lot, but I have never wished for them to die, even worse...I have never wanted you to become a murderer for me..."

The more he spoke, the more he sobbed. He slowly hugged himself and sat on the floor. He would viciously slam his head on the wall viciously from time to time, crisp banging sounds rang out as he choked from crying.

Seeing him torturing himself like that, the rage and jealousy in Ning Ning's body disappeared in a matter of moments.

She looked at him quietly for a while before she abruptly walked over, hugging his head, not allowing him to smash it on the wall.

"I know you aren't that type of person." She also started tearing up. "I'm just...too lonely..."

So I could not help but pull you into the darkness, I could not help

but turn you into a person like me...

At the same time, on the balcony of Ning Ning's house.

"You always loved to bring me to high places when we were young, one has to climb up to the peak of Mount Everest once himself." Wen Yu held two cans of beer, he reached out with a can in hand to the air in front of him. "Want some?"

An invisible hand took the beer can out of his hand and opened it, it clinked beer cans with him but did not drink out of it.

Wen Yu took a sip alone, then sighed, "This is hard for Ning Ning to say, so I'll be the one to tell you this personally."

Although he could not see him, he could determine Shi Zhong Tang's position using the beer, he looked over sincerely and seriously, "Big Bro, you are old."

The beer floating in front of him suddenly trembled ever so slightly.

"I'm actually from the future." Wen Yu told him the simplified version of his own situation along with the situation of the future, then he said, "Based on research, masked people can live for a very long time, they can even live from the Ming Dynasty up until modern times. But even if their body doesn't age, it doesn't mean that their mental state doesn't do the same. Big Bro, you're the same..."

He paused, he finally decided to go straight to the point and be straightforward about it.

"Your body is not old, but your mental state is." Wen Yu could not help but said, "You're not watching <<Person Within the Painting>> for the sake of seeing Ning Ning, it's to see yourself...the you who was young."

Two finger-shaped dents appeared on the beer can. He did not know whether it was because Shi Zhong Tang did not like the beer, or if he did not like what he was saying.

Wen Yu sighed in his heart.

Some words when spoken felt like they cut the flesh. It was natural to feel pain when rotting flesh was sliced off piece by piece, but if they were left on the body, the rot would one day spread into the organs.

He also didn't want to say the following words.

The problem was that the problem between their relationship was not just a problem between the two of them anymore, it was something which held everyone in the future at stake.

"Big Bro, you have your reasons to woo Ning Ning." He said slowly, "Because you are like the wind, you cannot stop. You need to chase after something—that thing can be a career, it can be a secret, it can also be a woman. It doesn't have to be Ning Ning. You could continue to chase her because she has not been saying yes. Once she agrees, you have to stop, then your life will become stagnant..."

Scaling heights fearlessly, seeking thrills, in Wen Yu's memories—in everyone's memories—Shi Zhong Tang had always been such a person.

No matter what he did, he would always strived for the best. Moreover, he would not do just one thing. Between acting, mountain climbing, martial arts, literature, investing—he mastered all of them, he was a genius who appeared once every few decades, maybe even once every century. Like a fierce gale, he was destined to stir up the entire generation.

Unfortunately, he died prematurely.

Reborn in Life Theater as a masked person.

This place did not fit him at all. A fixed location, fixed screenings, sometimes even the movies were fixed, the people around him were also a fixed set of masked people.

Just like a pool of stagnant water.

There would be new masked people joining him occasionally, but that would not cause any changes to the stagnant water, instead it would gradually erode the stagnant water further, he would turn lifeless just like the other masked people.

Shi Zhong Tang did not like this kind of place, he did not like these people as well.

What else could he love? What else could he chase after?

There was no other choice—

"Ning Ning doesn't understand that, so she accepted you." Wen Yu said, "But we understand, so..."

Glug, glug, glug...

The beer can was raised over Wen Yu's head, bright orange beer was poured on his head and flowed down to his feet.

"Little Brat, talking to yourself, what do you know?" Shi Zhong Tang raised his beer can with a repressed expression, he laughed out of extreme rage. "If I don't love her, I would not have come back at

all... Look at my hair!"

Cruel sun rays that looked like blood illuminated Shi Zhong Tang's head, his hair was still black, but the roots of his hair were already white.

"Who says that masked people would not age? I'm aging every minute I stand here... Ah, I'm sorry, I forgot that you can't see me." Shi Zhong Tang retracted his hand that emptied the beer can as he mocked, "You can only see the things you want to see anyway, wouldn't you say so? Philanthropist, savior of the world?"

Wen Yu wiped the beer off his face, he looked in front of him without any expression.

"You claim to want to save humanity, then, masked people aren't people anymore?" Shi Zhong Tang knocked on the mask on his face. "With this, do I not compare to a stranger whom you don't even know the name of anymore?"

"...Do you want to bring Ning Ning into the theater?" Wen Yu said with a deep voice, "I'm looking for the reason she went in. She could not have gone in on her own accord. Something must have happened to cause it, or maybe someone forced her to go in. The possibilities aren't many, her mother, you, or me, are all possible..."

"Heh, heh, it's not bad being a masked person, it's better than a lot of people with flesh and blood..."

"It's impossible for it to be her mother, it's impossible for it to be me, the one with the highest possibility right now is you..."

The two of them each spoke their piece. Due to the fact that they could not see nor hear one another, they could not communicate at all.

"Hey, we're getting nowhere." Shi Zhong Tang was the first to lose his patience. As he uttered his words, he tossed the beer can behind him, brushing past Wen Yu with a low voice and proceeded without hesitation, "Stick your nose out of our business! Life in the Morning, Death in the Evening, that's what she promised me!"

He would not bother with what would happen with the future.

Because he had no future at all!

The beer can was thrown in an arc and landed beside the rubbish bin, a gust of wind blew it and it fell downstairs, it landed right in front of a cat that was sunbathing on the pedestrian walkway.

"Meow!" The cat got scared and its fur stood on its ends, it quickly ran away from the pedestrian walkway.

In the next second, a motorcycle drove past where it was originally nesting at, leaving behind a flattened beer can.

The cat moved its right ear, looking up at where the beer can dropped from.

An argument, an unhappy parting, a beer can that was casually thrown away changed its fate.

How else would the future change?

Chapter 168

168: Hero

There was only the last scene remaining.

But Director Chen suddenly collapsed.

His thunderous collapse gave the bystanders a fright, a person who was lacking brain cells suddenly roared, "It's happening again!"

After the person scared them, the crew—who were already on edge—seemed to have turned into a flock of birds who had been startled by the sound of a bell, scattering around.

It even gave Ning Ning a fright. Was Rabbit Mask here again?

After running out with the bystanders for a while, she suddenly snapped out of it. What was she running away for? The others couldn't see, but she could. She did not see any trace of the rabbit mask, Director Chen clearly had his sickness acting up... Eh?!

"Director Chen! Get it together, Director Chen!"

Ning Ning rushed back. She patted him down then took out his medicine to feed him.

Not long later, the ambulance rushed over and sent him to the hospital.

The doors of the emergency room were closed, they would not open again in a short amount of time. Even if it did, Director Chen would not be able to immediately get up and start filming. The filming for the day stopped there, where should she go next?

Ning Ning stood at the entrance of the emergency room for a while. There were many reporters who had come during this period of time. They came with a bunch of tricky questions, it made her feel overwhelmed. Since she was not of much use standing there and she did not want to use the opportunity to gain exposure, she wore a face mask and left quietly.

"Miss Ning, what do you think of the events that have been happening to the crew?"

"There was news that said it was because Director Chen had offended someone, who do you think he had offended?"

"You are a person Director Chen favoured, you're leaving while he's still in the emergency room without waiting for the results, aren't you afraid that people would say that you're ungrateful?"

The group of reporters were unwilling to let her go, they followed her to the elevator.

Ding. The elevator door opened.

Ning Ning was stunned.

"Give way, please give way." The medical staff in the elevator shouted.

Ning Ning frantically gave way and watched as the medical staff got out of the elevator, a hospital trolley came out...together with a masked person.

The group of reporters were still surrounding her, but Ning Ning could not concentrate on what they were talking about at all, her entire focus was on the masked person.

And the masked person...his entire focus was on the woman on the hospital trolley.

Was that his relative or lover?

Was he here to accompany her, or...

"Ahh!" Ning Ning shouted quietly in surprise.

Because the masked person suddenly walked around to the medical staff's side and tripped them with his foot.

"Ah!" The medical staff lost balance from getting tripped by him, the masked person then bumped them with his shoulder. The medical staff's body tilted in an instant and fell towards the patient on the hospital trolley.

Luckily, the other medical staff had quick reflexes. They reached out their hands in the crucial moment and held him up, they said angrily, "What are you doing?"

"Sorry, sorry, I bumped into someone just now." The other party got up frantically and looked around indignantly, he seemed to be looking for the villain who had bumped into him.

"There was no one for him to bump into, he was the one who wasn't paying attention!" A reporter beside Ning Ning that saw the whole thing mocked him quietly.

No, it wasn't him...

Ning Ning stared at her front firmly.

She did not know if the woman on the hospital trolley was injured or sick, all she knew was that the two medical staff stopped arguing and were quickly pushing the hospital trolley towards the emergency room.

They couldn't see, the masked person was right in front waiting for them.

The moment the hospital trolley approached, he raised his foot.

This time he did not trip the medical staff.

He kicked the hospital trolley so hard that it tipped over.

The hospital trolley and the patient fell to the floor together, it was a huge ruckus that caused the nearby doctors and patients to stop what they were doing. They used a reproachful expression to look at the two innocent medical staff.

"What the hell are the two of you doing?" An old doctor who looked like a supervisor rushed over. Just as he was about to reprimand the two medical staff, a shriek rang out from the floor.

Beside the flipped hospital trolley, the woman had opened her eyes, lying supine on the floor. At first, she sprang up from the floor, then quickly collapsed back down, then she hugged her stomach and curled up like a shrimp as she rolled around on the floor...

This was what the crowd of people saw.

But in Ning Ning's eyes, she saw something else.

A masked person stood beside the woman. At first, he stepped on her stomach, the pain caused her to spring off the floor. Then, he stepped on her chest. She laid back down from getting stepped on. Afterwards, stomps after stomps, the woman was stomped into a shrimp. For the sake of trying to avoid his abuse, she rolled around, her head and face were bleeding from getting stomped at, but her hands hugged her stomach all the while.

Because she was pregnant.

Ning Ning pushed the reporters away abruptly and took two steps towards her.

The masked person stopped. He slowly turned his head to look at her, with a dark expression and a voice only she could hear, he asked, "You want to stick your nose where it doesn't belong?"

Although he was wearing a completely different mask, his bloodshot eyes and vicious eyes were no different from Mr. Rabbit.

This was a murderer, it didn't matter if he faced Ning Ning or the woman on the floor, he would not go soft.

Ning Ning's limbs felt heavy for a moment, her survival instincts gripped firmly onto her arms and legs.

"If only Wen Yu or Shi Tou Ge were here." She could not help but think.

Wen Yu had a lot of experience dealing with masked people. Since he could beat up Mr. Rabbit, he could beat up this masked person today. As for Shi Zhong Tang, he was trained in martial arts, taking care of a couple of hooligans was as easy as eating or drinking to him. A murderer would be harder to deal with, but it would also only be a difficulty of eating two meals or drinking two bowls of water.

"Even if it was Chen Shuang He who was here, I would at least have someone's help..." She thought again.

But she only had herself now.

She asked herself, could she win?

This was not like before. In the past, she was able to leave things to luck and bravely give things a shot no matter how scary or dangerous the situation was. That was because she transmigrated into another person's body using the movie theater. This was not the movie theater, this was reality, she was standing here by herself.

Moreover, the reporters were around her, every single one of her movements would be filmed. What would they write later on? Insanity? Delusional? Would there be another director who would be willing to use her?

Those considerations ceased with one sentence.

"Save...m—" the woman on the floor was bleeding from her nose and mouth, looking in Ning Ning's direction as she hugged her stomach and pleaded for help in a frail manner, "...my child,"

This was a mother.

Ning Ning turned around and left abruptly. A group of reporters naturally followed her, forming a human wall blocking off the vision of the masked person behind her.

A man's laughter rang out behind her, it was quickly followed up by the horrible scream of a woman.

Ning Ning suddenly grabbed a female reporter beside her. "Do you have pepper spray on you?"

The female reporter was stunned, "I don't..."

Ning Ning immediately went up to another female reporter. "Do you have pepper spray on you?"

"I do, I do." This reporter was petite, she immediately reached into her purse to pull out the pepper spray, but she did not hand it over immediately, she grinned instead. "Ning-Jie, when are you free..."

"Thank you," Ning Ning swiped it over, "I'll accept your interview later."

She turned around and tunneled out of the crowd to walk towards the masked person.

There was a medical staff who tried to help the woman up, but the masked person kicked them on their temple. Before they could help the woman up, they fell onto the floor themselves and did not get up after. Anyone who approached the area were also kicked, although they did not pass out like the first person, all of them were startled and their movements became cautious.

"Who else?" The masked person looked content with what he had done. The woman on the floor used both her arms and legs as she tried to crawl away secretly, but was stopped when the masked person stepped on her. He walked towards the medical staff in front of him as he clamoured smugly.

"Me."

The masked person's eyes sank, he looked back.

Pssss—

"Ah!!!" The masked person covered his eyes and screamed, "My eyes!!!"

Ning Ning stood in front of him while holding the pepper spray up. As a precaution, she continued to press it down.

Masked people were not truly invisible after all, all the movie theater did was to use a special method to remove them from the vision of normal people. But when it came down to it, they were still human, a human could be hurt by another human, even killed.

"Stupid bitch!!" The masked person pounced at the direction where he remembered Ning Ning was standing at with his eyes closed.

Ning Ning turned around and ran.

After running for a few steps, she stopped and looked back at him. He was like a bear who had its eyes hurt by a hunter, roaring loudly, attacking everyone around him indiscriminately.

A reporter who was close to him suffered. Their recording pen was dropped as they got punched, they started bleeding from their head from another punch, their face started to look like a dyehouse all of a sudden, turning bright coloured.

"Doctor, sedative, do you have sedatives, give me a syringe of it." Ning Ning shouted at a doctor.

That shout ended up confirming the masked person's target. He immediately tossed the reporter and ran towards Ning Ning. Ning Ning shouted out and started running, throwing things at him as she ran—handbag, flower vase, rubbish bin... She threw everything in her hands along with anything she could see at him.

The masked person took off a piece of rind from his head and said angrily, "You...tsk!"

Ning Ning snatched a hot water bottle from a family member of a patient, opened it and splashed it at him.

"Ahhh!!" The masked person retreated from getting scalded.

The water on his body dripped wherever he went.

Ning Ning's eyes lit up. She pointed at the water on the floor and said, "Do you see that? He's here! Hit him, hit him!"

A moment of silence.

Just as Ning Ning's heart started to sink, an unfinished lunchbox was thrown over, followed by a chair, a used syringe... Patients and doctors, even reporters threw the video cameras they had brought along.

Inciting the rage of the crowd would cause someone's death even without them being ill...a masked person might not die from getting scolded, but getting hit with a video camera on the head, the masked person's body swayed, he finally fell on the floor.

Ning Ning did not know if he had really passed out, she did not dare to go confirm it, all she could do was stay rooted on the spot with her trembling legs.

A doctor walked over with a sedative. "Here."

Ning Ning pointed at the masked person in front of her. *You're the professional you do it...shit, why are you looking at me with such an innocent expression?*

"Hold on." There wasn't anyone else who could see masked people present at the moment. Ning Ning could not help it, she could only force herself to take the syringe with the sedative. Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, she walked over with trembling hands, sticking the needle into his body.

...Hold on, masked people do not bleed blood, they bleed tape, was their body different from humans? Would a sedative really work on them?

Before Ning Ning could come to a conclusion, a group of reporters had already surrounded her, their cameras pointing at her from all directions.

"What exactly was that?"

"Why were you the only one who could see it?"

"Look at me! Look at me, Ning-Jie!" The petite reporter who had lent Ning Ning the pepper spray squeezed out from the crowd with great difficulty. She asked breathlessly, "As a hero who stepped forward bravely and saved everyone, can you say a few words to the audience?"

"Hero?" Ning Ning was taken aback, she looked down at her still trembling hands then let out a bitter laugh. "I've never thought of being a hero. It was just...I also had one, a mother who would throw away her life for me."

Countless cameras pointed at her.

In the next second, in the bustling shopping malls, the rows and rows of television all had the same shot, the shot was that of Ning Ning.

Chapter 169

169: Gift Yourself to Me

"Bang!"

Shi Zhong Tang could hear the salvo within the theater before he stepped in.

"What's going on?" He said as he entered.

He looked out, a group of heads were gathered round.

Ever since the doorman disappeared, the masked people scattered, although some of them came back one after the other, they had never gathered together like they did today.

"Ah, you're back." Rabbit Mask turned around. "Just in time, I was about to get someone to go look for you."

He walked over and pulled Shi Zhong Tang into the hall.

Indeed, the hall.

The wood carved chairs of the audience seats have been pulled to the side, a big space opened up at the floor in the middle, on the empty space sat a man and a woman, the rest of the masked people surrounded them, some of them cheered, some of them pulled the party poppers, some of them waited to catch the bride's bouquet.

Shi Zhong Tang whistled. "Wedding?"

Having been in the movie theater for over a decade, this was the first time he had seen a wedding between masked people.

He knew the groom. He was wearing a dog mask, a very simple and honest man, as for the bride...a venice mask inlaid with gems, sparkling with endless luxury and beauty, Shi Zhong Tang had never seen this mask before. A newcomer?

Venice Mask threw the bouquet in her hands on the floor, saying coldly, "Who would want to get married to you?!"

This caused the cheers and salvo of poppers to stop.

"Little Lin, Little Lin, where are you going?" Dog Mask shouted as he chased after her.

The two of them ran past Shi Zhong Tang one after another as they rushed out of the theater entrance.

The crowd looked at each other. One of them said, "Let's go, follow them and see what's going on."

The crowd chased after them with a rumble. Shi Zhong Tang touched his chin and asked Madam Cat, "Who is that girl? Why do I have the feeling that I've met her before?"

Mr. Rabbit gave him a side eye. "You seem to know every pretty girl."

"You sound jealous." Shi Zhong Tang suddenly started laughing. "Ah, I remember now, Ning Ning's makeup artist...so she didn't die."

Ning Ning had told him about what happened at the set.

They all thought that the makeup artist had died, killed by Mr. Rabbit. But by the looks of it now, she didn't actually die, she had turned into a masked person.

As for why everyone thought she died...heh heh, didn't everyone think that he had died too? It was even suicide. Yet, he was completely fine, standing here right now. The movie theater just used a special method to make everyone in the world think that he had died, so he could be removed from the sights of normal people.

"I wanted to kill her." Mr. Rabbit had a complicated expression on his face. "Who knew she had such good luck, she turned into a masked person before I could."

There were a few ways to turn into a masked person. Every person who could see masked people seemingly would all turn into a masked person, of course, there were also exceptions, for example...

"Only I'm this unlucky!!" Mr. Rabbit kicked a chair by his side, he was sad and angry. "My wife is the only one who refused to become a masked person and come in to accompany me!"

Shi Zhong Tang was taken aback.

He did not understand it at first, how did this weak and honest fellow who had not even dared to scold his wife suddenly get the courage to kill her?

"So that was your plan..." Shi Zhong Tang shook his head, he said blandly, "You have the wrong kind of ideas. Let's go, we should go over to see if we can save it."

The wedding could not be held anymore.

They had become enemies after failing to become lovers.

"I was living a very good life, it's all because of you!" The makeup artist broke free of Dog Mask's hand, she turned around and roared angrily at him, "It's your business that you are not living well, why did you have to drag me down with you?"

"I...I..." Dog Mask was speechless.

"And the rest of you!" The makeup artist pointed at the other masked people, scolding them without thinking, "What are all of you kicking up a fuss for? Birds of the same feather really do flock together. I'm different from all of you, different! The chief of Dark Blue Company had already proposed to me, the ring had already been prepared, I...don't want to wear this toy..."

She forcefully tried to tear off the mask on her face, but she could not tear it off no matter how much she tried. She slowly knelt down on the floor, hugging herself and sobbing.

"What are you still standing around for?" A hand gave Dog Mask's back a push. "She needs you."

Dog Mask rushed up to the makeup artist's side frantically and reached out a hand towards her.

"Get lost!" The makeup artist swatted his hand away. "I don't want to see you!"

Dog Masked turned his head and looked at Shi Zhong Tang with a pleading expression.

Shi Zhong Tang let out a deep sigh. "How do you expect me to help you?"

He walked over, ignored the struggles of the makeup artist as he forcefully stuffed it into Dog Mask's hand.

"What are you doing?" The makeup artist screamed.

"He'll accompany you back." Shi Zhong Tang said.

The makeup artist was taken aback.

"Since you aren't willing to stay in the movie theater, then you should go back." Shi Zhong Tang smiled at her. "No one is stopping you."

"...I don't need him to accompany me!" The makeup artist tried her best to get free from his hands. She turned her head to look at Dog Mask whose eyes were filled with hope. She said in an ice cold tone, "I

am someone who is already engaged, please maintain a distance away from me!"

After she said that, she turned around and left. As if she was deathly afraid of them going back on their words, her pace grew faster and faster. She finally started running, seeming like there was a group of mad dogs that had been starving for a week behind her, that if she were to slow down even a little they would pull her back and eat her.

As they watched her figure gradually disappear, Shi Zhong Tang gave Dog Mask's back another pat. "Go after her."

Dog Mask felt dejected. "She doesn't want to see me...I think I'm the whole reason she became a masked person, she must hate me to death."

After he said that, he suddenly turned around and walked towards Rabbit Mask.

"Hey, hey, what are you doing?" Rabbit Mask was shocked. "I helped you, you can't return kindness with ingratitude..."

"Help me my ass!" Dog Mask punched him in the face.

The two of them got into a tussle on the floor, the other masked people either watched coldly from the side or came up to try and talk them out of it.

"You dog!" When he was being pulled apart, Rabbit Mask kicked and scolded, "If not for me, who knows how many other men she would have been with! That gold digger, there were a few rich and good looking guys by her side, you really want to be the cuckold king?"

"That's none of your business, is there a problem with me willing to accept her no matter what she did?" Dog Mask's words astonished everyone, "Based on my looks and income, if my goddess is willing to let me be a rebound, then that would mean she has enough respect for me!"

"..." Rabbit Mask was dumbstruck and speechless!

"In the past, I could still be the rebound, but now I don't even have a sliver of a chance anymore!" Dog Mask broke free of the arms that were holding him back, he rushed over again. "I've never done anything against you, why must you do this to me!"

The two of them argued and fought each other, in the end the two of them got beaten up like dogs, lying flat on the floor as they gasped for air.

"It's over, it's all over." Dog Mask looked at the ceiling, a sparkle of tears flashed in the corner of his eye.

"That's right, your life as a rebound has ended." A tall figure walked up beside him, his shadow enveloping Dog Mask's body. "Now you have to restart."

Dog Mask looked over at the figure.

"What do you think will happen when she gets back?" Shi Zhong Tang slowly knelt down beside him.

Dog Mask, "..."

"Everything that you have gone through, she would have to go through as well." Shi Zhong Tang said with a laugh, pedestrians walked past behind him, but they were blind to him. "No one could see her, no one could hear her, her fiance would be sad at first, but it would not last forever. He will have a new girlfriend, get married, have children, he will gradually stop thinking about her, forget about her, have no need for her..."

Dog Mask suddenly sat up from the floor and murmured, "I have to go."

When she didn't need me, I could be away from her, but when she needed me, I had to be by her side.

He left so frantically that he did not even have enough time to listen to the last part of Shi Zhong Tang's words.

"In the end she would realise that..." Shi Zhong Tang looked down and muttered, his hair covering the emotions in his eyes, "The only people who could be with masked people are only masked people..."

It seemed like something had quietly changed.

No one noticed, only Rabbit Mask felt it to some extent, he took a deep glimpse at Shi Zhong Tang.

"What exactly was that?"

Shi Zhong Tang was stunned for a moment, he turned his head to take a look.

"Why were you the only one who can see it?"

The other masked people also turned around and looked at it one after another.

"Look at me! Look at me, Ning Jie!" On the store counters, rows and rows of television all had the same shot, the shot was that of a person.

-Ning Ning.

"Hero?" Ning Ning let out a bitter laugh, "I've never thought of being a hero, it was just...I also had one, a mother that would throw away her life for me."

"Bad news."

Shi Zhong Tang slowly looked back.

He did not know when Madam Cat had appeared behind him, she told him and the crowd, "Ning Ning is going to the movie theater, she wants to redesignate a doorman."

At night, Life Theater entrance.

"I can't go in without a ticket." Ning Ning took off the sunglasses on her face and said, "But I know you can hear me. Answer my question, what is the selection criteria for the doorman?"

The masked people problem was getting worse and worse. She originally thought that she still had time, that she could wait until she finished filming, but after the incident today, she changed her mind.

There must be a new doorman.

She was not a hero, she did not have the ability, nor the courage. After all, she was but one person. Adding on Wen Yu and Shi Zhong Tang would only make them a group of three, the enemy had a whole group! It was better to solve the problem with one fell swoop with a new doorman!

It was a windless night, the two rows of lanterns hung low. A few moths circling the lanterns, fluttering their wings, there was no other sound besides those. Just as Ning Ning was hesitating on whether to knock on the door and shout for someone, a lazy voice rang out, it sounded like a man and a woman, it sounded old and young, "I don't want to answer the same question one, two, three, or four times."

Ning Ning breathed a sigh of relief. She was not here to sing the same old tune either, she was using this question to see if it was here instead, if she could communicate with it outside the movie theater.

"Don't worry, I remember. The first condition is that the person has to be willing." She said, "Speaking of willing, I have a candidate in mind...Li Bo Yue."

He was also the only person who told her he wanted to be the doorman.

"Is he hated?" The voice rang out from behind the entrance.

Ning Ning was taken aback, she hesitated before saying, "He is a very outstanding manager. He plays his cards well, he is very resourceful, he generally doesn't make enemies... Alright, because he is outstanding, it is hard for him to not get hated by people from the same line as him."

"Then he fits the criteria," the movie theater said, "bring him to me."

Ning Ning held her phone, but she could not make the call at all.

Li Bo Yue had both gone against her and helped her. Moreover, their parents had an ambiguous relationship, the two of them might even be biological siblings. He knew some things about Life Theater, but most of them were from the mouth of Pei Xuan, Ning Ning reckoned Pei Xuan had only told him about the benefits of being the doorman and not the downside.

If she didn't tell him either, Li Bo Yue would definitely agree.

Buzz, buzz...

Her phone suddenly started to vibrate, her screen lit up with the caller's name—Li Bo Yue.

Speaking of the devil. Ning Ning answered the call, "Hello."

"There is no need to let many people know about Life Theater," Li Bo Yue's voice sounded quite unhappy, "moreover, you are the future movie empress, not a pretty girl who subdues demons!"

Ning Ning, "Yes..."

"I will think of a way to suppress this matter, you watch out on your end. If there are any more reporters who approach you for an interview, don't say anything weird, you can get them to talk to me instead." Li Bo Yue said, "Alright, we'll leave it here for now, I'm hanging up."

"Hold on..."

"Is there anything else?"

Ning Ning hesitated for a moment before she decided to tell him the truth. As for how he would choose, it was completely up to him. "I want to talk to you about the matter of the doorman."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

"Explain it to me in twelve words."

...Are you a high school teacher? Ning Ning took a deep breath. "The doorman is a lifelong tenure, they give their lives to the entrance of the theater. Other masked people have a movie which belongs to them, they have a chance to change their fate, the doorman doesn't!"

"You went over the limit." Li Bo Yue said slowly, "What else?"

Ning Ning, "Don't...you feel vexed?"

"You did not see what Pei Xuan looked like on his sick bed. He was so fierce and ambitious when he was young. Once he got old, he could only live while wearing a diaper. He crawled back to the theater entrance a few times but he could not enter. The biggest regret he had when he died was that he had given up on his immortality and run away from Life Theater." Li Bo Yue sighed. "I don't want to end up like him, I have to leave myself a way out."

A way out? Ning Ning felt a trace of ill omen from his words.

As expected, Li Bo Yue's next words were, "So stop asking about that, I won't be the doorman for now."

"...You plan to become the doorman after you get old?" Ning Ning asked.

"Of course." Li Bo Yue laughed. "There are so many things to eat and experience in the world, I will not be able to enjoy them once I become the doorman, I would go in after I have had my fill."

He said that he didn't want to be another Pei Xuan, but the two of them were already very similar, similarly calculative, everything had long been planned.

Unfortunately, it was hard to disobey God's will, no one could predict what kind of accident would happen in the next moment.

The instant she hung up, the voice that sounded like a man and a woman, old and young, rang out from behind Ning Ning, it asked, "Do you really want to round up all the escaped masked people?"

"I do."

"Are you hated?"

Ning Ning looked back, she looked at the entrance in front of her with a weird expression. That was strange, didn't it ask a similar question just now?

"I'm but a small-time actor...usually busy with work, I don't even interact with people, who would hate me?" Ning Ning's words got slower and slower, finally she said with a bitter laugh. "These were

matters of the past. Now, I have acted in a few consecutive popular shows, I have snatched roles out of the hands of a few big time actors, now I'm even the female lead headlining <<Phantom of the Theater>>...the amount of people who likes me would be the same as the amount of people who hates me."

The movie theater laughed.

Its voice was already weird, it sounded even weirder when it laughed, it was like a crowd of people of all ages laughing together, the echoing laughter scared off the moths around the lantern.

"Then," it said as it laughed, "you also fit the criteria."

Ning Ning was taken aback.

"You can choose to give Li Bo Yue to me, but if he's unwilling to come...," its laughter had a trace of almost undetectable urgency, along with enchantment between the lines, "you could also give yourself to me."

Ning Ning could only feel a jet of cold air.

Like a moth flying into a spiderweb, being unable to see the spider in the darkness, every thread of the spiderweb was trembling slightly, the avaricious appetite of the spider was conveyed through the threads of the spiderweb.

"Ning Ning!"

Ning Ning looked back and saw Shi Zhong Tang rushing towards her. He was panting hard, extremely frantic, he started shouting at her from a long distance away, "Quick, quickly get in a car!"

There was a taxi that was driving past right at this time, Ning Ning hailed it, the two of them got in the taxi one after another, Ning Ning mouthed her question to him, "What happened?"

"Quick, we need to leave this place first." Shi Zhong Tang urged.

"Driver, start driving." Ning Ning told the driver.

The car started up, but before it could drive off, *bang*—! It gave the people in the car a huge fright. Ning Ning turned her head and looked over, she saw that the window beside her head had cracked, the cracks spreading out in all directions, in the middle was a marble that sparkled coldly.

The driver looked back and almost jumped out of his shoes, he immediately stopped the car, got off and scolded madly, "Which son of a bitch did this? Comrade traffic policeman, comrade traffic

policeman, come have a look at this..."

Besides the traffic police, the other pedestrians and vehicles on the road also stopped out of curiosity, the road clogged up in an instant. Ning Ning was about to get out, but Shi Zhong Tang held her from the side. "Don't get off, get Wen Yu to come fetch you!"

Ning Ning called Wen Yu as she asked with a lingering fear, "You know who's doing this?"

"Yes..." Before Shi Zhong Tang finished speaking, he suddenly pushed Ning Ning out of the car.

With a crash, a refrigerator fell from the sky and caved the roof of the car in.

Screams rang out from around the car, the driver's eyes turned dark, he looked up and roared, "Which son of a bitch did it this time?? Don't think of escaping, I'll break your legs!!"

Run!!

Shi Zhong Tang dragged Ning Ning along as he ran madly.

"Who are we running from?" Ning Ning asked as she was getting pulled along.

Before Shi Zhong Tang could answer, a Buick flew in and stopped in front of the two of them, Wen Yu wound down the window. "Get in."

Ning Ning frantically hopped on, seemingly almost immediately after they closed the door, a marble was shot on the window.

She looked over.

A man holding a slingshot, a grinning urchin mask.

It was a masked person.

The car started, Ning Ning turned her head back, her body shivered slightly. She gritted her teeth and said, "Why are they trying to kill me?"

The Buick drove past a bus stop. There were some people that were either standing or sitting at the bus stop waiting for the bus, every one of them were holding their phones. Coincidentally, every one of their phones were playing the same video, in the videos was the same person.

"Hero?" Ning Ning let out a bitter laugh in the video, "I've never thought of being a hero, it was just...I also had one, a mother who would throw

away her life for me."

"Because the masked people don't need a hero like you." Within the car, Shi Zhong Tang sighed, he slowly turned his head to look at Ning Ning. "Even less so for a doorman."

Ning Ning looked at him speechless.

"Ning Ning, you need to be prepared." Shi Zhong Tang told her word by word with a serious expression, "From now on, every masked person will be coming for you. Besides me...every masked person is your enemy!"

Little Theater:

Masked People: Masked people will never be slaves!

[The picture cut out...]

It was raining flowers, three people sat on a swing.

Ning Ning: Sigh, it's really not easy to get into a pure relationship.

Movie Theater: Sigh, it's really not easy to find a doorman.

Ah Xia: Sigh, it's really not easy to end the series this month.

Shi Tou Ge + Wen Yu pushing the swing with all their might: *huff, puff, huff, puff, huff, puff, huff, puff...*

Chapter 170

170: The Final Scene

"Hello, it's 'Are You Hungry Takeout'..." The delivery man held a bag and walked up the stairs, he was almost frolicking as he thought about the possibility of asking for a signature when the door opened later.

He stopped suddenly in his tracks and looked back.

A rubber ball dropped on the floor, bounced twice and rolled into a corner.

Who threw the ball? The delivery man looked up, no one was in sight.

His gaze then returned to the ball. He furrowed his brow before he continued up the stairs, mumbling, "How unlucky, there had to be a power outage when I'm here..."

The apartment building without electricity was pitch black, there was only a single ray of moonlight shining in from the window of the corridor.

Just as he stepped on a step of stairs, he suddenly heard a sound, "Thump."

—The sound of a rubber ball hitting the floor.

Thump, thump, thump. Once, twice, thrice, who was bouncing the ball behind him?

The delivery man quickly looked back, there was no one! There was only a rubber ball at the instant he looked back, falling to the floor, bouncing twice and rolling towards a corner.

He started sweating very quickly, instinctively taking two steps back. His heels were tripped up by the stairs, causing him to fall down sitting on the stairs. He cursed under his breath before he frantically got up. He did not dare to run down the stairs in the direction of the ball, he could only climb up with all his might.

He rushed to Ning Ning's door in an instant.

"Open up, open up!" He punched and kicked the door in front of him, not caring if he would get a poor rating later.

The door did not open, an eye appeared behind the peephole. She said, "Is it the delivery man?"

"It's...me...behind..." The delivery man huffed and puffed as he spoke incoherently.

"There's nothing behind you." Ning Ning said.

Just as her voice petered out, the light outside her door flashed, then the corridor turned snow white—the electricity had come back up.

"It's true." Ning Ning said gently, "See for yourself if you don't believe me."

Sometimes humans were like moths, they feared the dark and liked the light. This sudden burst of light seemed to have given the originally limp delivery man a shot of strength, giving him the strength to look back.

Phew—the sound of a long breath.

There was no one behind him, neither was there a rubber ball.

With a lingering fear in his heart, he lost his mood to get the signature as well. "I'll leave the food here." The delivery man bent down and put the food on the floor, then turned around and walked into the elevator.

Ding—

The door opened, the delivery man entered. He turned around and faced the door, his eyes suddenly widened, he quickly hit the close door button.

Thud, thud, thud—the sound of a bouncing ball.

There was not a person in sight in the corridor, but the sound of the bouncing ball got closer. *Thud, thud, thud*. A brown rubber ball bounced up and down, coming up the stairs step by step.

"Quick, quick, quickly close the door ahhh!!" The delivery man clawed at the close door button madly. The elevator door slowly closed in front of him, keeping the rubber door outside of the elevator.

Thud, thud, thud—the rubber ball suddenly stopped in the air.

A pair of pale arms hugged the ball. They slowly turned around and faced Ning Ning's door.

Looking through the peephole, she saw that it was a masked person in the form of a child, beside him were asked people of all genders

and ages.

One of them picked up the bag the delivery man had left behind. They slowly walked towards the rubbish bin by the staircase, let go of their hand and dropped the food into the rubbish bin.

That had been happening for three consecutive days.

On the fourth day, Director Chen could not bear it anymore, he got someone to push him to Ning Ning's house.

"Come out." He said coldly, "Otherwise, I will make sure you won't be able to stay in the show business anymore. I'll give you ten seconds. Ten, nine, eight..."

The door opened, Ning Ning stood in the doorway looking a little frail, her eyes drifted all around before they finally landed on Director Chen.

"I don't care what reason you have for not coming to the set for a few days, come back with me now, you are not allowed to come home before the filming is done." Director Chen shot a look at his assistant, his assistant turned his wheelchair around and walked towards the elevator. Halfway to the elevator, Director Chen looked back, "Catch up!"

Ning Ning could only follow them.

The wheelchair entered the elevator first, followed by the assistant's feet, then Ning Ning's feet.

The assistant pressed the close door button, but the doors did not close.

The weight limit indicator rang out.

The assistant looked around with a confused expression. There were only three people in the elevator, why would the weight limit indicator start ringing? Was the elevator broken? He pressed the close door button again. When the doors closed down the middle, he breathed a sigh of relief and returned to the back of Director Chen's wheelchair.

The floor indicator changed from seven to six, the assistant tugged on his tie and laughed. "It feels a little stuffy."

"Yeah." Ning Ning said absent-mindedly, "It's probably because there's a lot of people in here."

The hands which were fixing the tie froze. On the elevator doors in front of them that were as smooth as a mirror, there was a reflection

showing the three people.

On the left was Ning Ning in a red dress, in the middle was Director Chen on the wheelchair, on the right was the assistant who was holding on to the wheelchair.

Behind them, were rows and rows of masked people.

Ning Ning took out her phone and sent a text: [The bait has been bitten, the rest is up to you.]

After the text was sent, the door to Ning Ning's house opened again.

Wen Yu walked out of her house.

"Big Bro, it's time for us to go." Wen Yu held his phone and said with a deep voice, "I guess you want to ask me where we're going next... In the prison, among the people who were about to be executed, we would definitely be able to find a couple of scoundrels who are hated, who doesn't want to die and would rather become the doorman."

Upon finishing his words, he walked towards the elevator.

The elevator door opened and closed, on the elevator doors in front of them that were as smooth as a mirror, were the two figures.

One to the left and one to the right, the elder brother and the younger brother.

The elevator door opened.

"I'll be on my way." Wen Yu walked out of the elevator first. He stopped in his tracks and said without looking back, "You should leave quickly as well...don't let her down."

Three days ago, they were chased into the house by the masked people. What followed was a long period of siege. You couldn't come in, I could not go out either. You didn't have to eat, I could survive on meal replacement powder anyway. Amidst the stalemate, Shi Zhong Tang acted as the negotiator. He was free to travel between the two sides, but it did not bring about much results in those three days.

Continuing that way was not the way to go.

"I might as well be a bait and lure the masked people away." Ning Ning finally made up her mind and told Wen Yu, "You go look for the doorman candidate, the criteria for the candidate is this..."

Afterwards, everything proceeded according to plan.

"I hope everything goes successfully." Ning Ning prayed in her heart

in Director Chen's car as she looked at her surroundings cautiously.

Maybe Shi Zhong Tang's negotiations had worked? No one shot Director Chen's car window with a slingshot while they were on the road.

The car arrived at the set safely. Ning Ning looked back, why did they not follow them? What was going on? Did the bait plan fail? Did they go looking for Wen Yu?

"Why did you stop again?" Director Chen looked back anxiously as well, he got a little angry. "Why are you still fiddling with your phone? The crew has stopped work for a few days already, do you want to work or not?"

"Coming, coming." Ning Ning could only send a text to Wen Yu, then frantically enter the makeup room.

There was a new makeup artist today. Although their skills were not up to par compared to the previous, they worked fast, with their nimble hands, the makeup on Ning Ning was done very quickly.

After changing into the costume, Ning Ning walked out of the makeup room.

She was taken aback.

The crew stood in an orderly manner, the masked people also stood in an orderly manner.

"It's the final scene, let's work hard to finish it today." Director Chen clapped with a copy of a script that was rolled up against his palm.

The final scene, < <The Phantom's Stage> >.

The male lead still ended up with the rich young lady eventually, the phantom got on stage herself, ignoring the consequences due to hatred and jealousy.

Acting for the first time with others, but it was also the last time.

The final brilliance, the most beautiful singing voice, the most real me—I would give everything to you, so...choose me.

"I'm here." Shi Zhong Tang's voice rang out beside Ning Ning, "Our side is going smoothly, what about you? Is your side alright?"

Ning Ning pointed at the audience with her chin, indicating that he should look for himself.

Shi Zhong Tang turned his head and looked over, he saw that within the theater that was used to film this scene, there was not an

empty seat.

There were people, there were also masked people.

An extra walked to their seat and was about to sit down. Mr. Rabbit who was on the seat reached out and kicked them on their butt. The extra held their butt and looked back then started arguing with another extra who was on the seat beside him. Afterwards, both of them were chased out by the assistant director. What happened to the extra seat? Mr. Rabbit gestured to Shi Zhong Tang for him to take it.

"...What are they doing?" Ning Ning touched her head while being at a loss for words.

"They're here to watch you act." Shi Zhong Tang laughed. "Masked people have very few forms of entertainment, many have not seen live filming before."

"...This doesn't feel right?" Ning Ning said doubtfully, "They were coming after my life previously, now they suddenly want to watch me act? Did their brains short circuit? Or are they actually my hardcore fans? The reason that they had stood outside my house for three days was to wait for me to come out and give them a signature?"

That was impossible, there must be another reason.

Shi Zhong Tang fell silent for a moment before he smiled. "Actually it's because of what I told them."

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them that what happened at the hospital was an accident, that they could tell from the news that you are not targeting masked people, you are targeting the scum who abuses pregnant women."

"...That's it?"

"That's it."

Ning Ning stared at him with suspicion. Shi Zhong Tang definitely said something to them, otherwise that group of people would not suddenly give in. But it was probably not because Shi Zhong Tang told them what he claimed, or he did not only tell them just that statement? Because this group of masked people were really hard to talk to.

"So next up, you have to perform well." Shi Zhong Tang caressed the mask on her face—the white mask that the phantom wears, he said gently, "Your full devotion will bring about their full engagement, the better you act, the longer they will watch, giving Wen Yu more

time."

...Ah, that's right, what other methods are there besides this?

Be it negotiating or fighting, neither of those were what she was good at, she only knew how to act.

Then as Shi Zhong Tang had wished, she would use what she was best at, the acting skills that she had honed time and time again from Life Theater, to make the group of masked people stay on the audience seats.

"A!"

The final scene, < <The Phantom's Stage> > , officially began.

Chapter 171

171: The Phantom's Stage

The city only had one prison.

There was a new batch of criminals who were sent there today. The prison guards were standing guard at the entrance, the masked people were also standing guard at the entrance.

The weather was a little hot and humid. Using their hands to fan themselves, both sides started to complain.

"Why is it not here yet?"

At First People's Hospital in the city.

"Wait up, wait up!" A big fellow ran towards the elevator with his old mother on his back.

A clean and slender hand pressed on the open door button, the elevator door that was about to completely close opened up again.

"Thank you, thank you." The big fellow rushed into the elevator and told the owner of the hand.

"You're welcome." Wen Yu retracted his hand and smiled at him politely.

The elevator door closed. After an instant of weightlessness, it started to rise.

The elevator doors that were as smooth as a mirror reflected Wen Yu's expressionless face.

At first, he had told Shi Zhong Tang he would go to the prison.

Indeed, he would go there, but not immediately.

"The prison is hard to get into and hard to get out of, but the hospital is different." Wen Yu thought, "Among people who are going to die, I could definitely find a couple of scoundrels who are hated, are unwilling to accept death and would rather become the doorman."

The hospital. A place of birth, old age, illness and death. There were countless people there frowning with concern, countless people who were crying out in anguish and countless people who were struggling to stay alive on the hospital beds, all for the sake of living

for one more day. Here, he would definitely be able to find a suitable candidate.

...Wait a minute.

The things he could think of, did Big Brother really not think of as well?

Ding—

The elevator door slowly opened.

The big fellow beside him exclaimed, "Who did it? Why did the door open for no one?"

Wen Yu stared at the empty elevator entrance closely.

Was there...really no one there?

The big fellow mumbled, the door closed back up. The elevator started rising up again, it only got up one floor before the doors opened again.

A woman with a child stood outside the elevator. She looked around the inside of the elevator, then looked back at her sickly daughter and said, "It's full, let's take the next one."

Wen Yu was taken aback, he rushed out of the elevator in an instant.

Just as his front foot stepped out of the elevator, his other leg was pulled back.

Amidst the screams of the woman and the little girl—*ding*, the elevator door closed again.

At the same time, at < <Phantom of the Theater> > set.

Although there had been a few ups and downs, filming had finally arrived at the last scene, < <The Phantom's Stage> >.

The scene narrated how the male lead had finally become the most popular actor of the time due to the teachings of the phantom and the full support of the rich young lady. Attention followed him wherever he went, he truly had a bright future.

But at the same time, wherever he went, death followed.

Those who dared speak ill of him behind his back, those who secretly played dirty tricks on him, those who had designs on his good looks—all of them met a violent end. As time went by, some things began to surface. In the end, an old man from the theater revealed a

secret of the past—below the theater, in a place that was covered in complete darkness, lived a woman, a woman named Phantom.

This woman had been killing for the male lead.

That day the male lead got on stage to perform again, he was to sing the song that shot him to fame <<New Peony Pavilion>>. There were no empty seats. Amongst the audience was of course the rich young lady, the numerous audience members around her were discussing excitedly on who would be the one to die next. The rich young lady beckoned her confidant to come to her, she covered her mouth and said, "I'll be the bait. The phantom had wanted to kill me a few times already, there wouldn't be an exception this time. You guys get ready, catch her the moment she comes out, dead or alive!"

An applause roared out all of a sudden. She turned her head and gazed over, her eyes sparkled. *Clap, clap, clap*—she started to clap.

She was a distinguished guest who sat at the best and most conspicuous seat. Chen Shuang He tilted his head and found her, the two of them exchanged looks.

"The trap is ready."

"Understood, I will coordinate with you."

Without needing any words, they knew what the other was thinking.

Chen Shuang He liked that kind of feeling. Although a lot of people said that the rich young lady was a shallow person, it was because she was shallow that he was able to see through her with one look. Unlike another person, seeing through him completely, controlling him like a puppet master with their fingertips.

He was tired, weary and scared. He wanted to break away from the phantom, to get married to a normal woman, to live a normal life.

"*We have no idea where our love began,*" Chen Shuang He started to sing a little absent-mindedly, "*but we will be devoted to a lifelong love.*"

By his ear, a moving voice followed up, "*The living could die, the dead could live.*"

Chen Shuang He was stunned, he looked over.

They thought she would act the way she always had, hiding behind the scenes, stabbing people in the back.

No one expected a beautiful singing voice to ring out behind the scarlet curtain. In the entire vocabulary, there was no word to

accurately describe her voice. They only knew that once she started singing, the entire theater turned silent. Everyone had forgotten to blink, forgotten to breathe, even their blood had forgotten to stop flowing, each of their organs had stopped functioning, only their ears were still in use. Even the rich young lady who most hated the phantom raised her hand uncontrollably, stopping her confidant from leaving. However, she did not have to do that, the confidant themselves was also enchanted by the singing, they did not notice her new instruction at all.

"Love from within a dream..." The scarlet curtain slowly opened. With a mask on her face, wearing a costume, the phantom made an appearance on stage, she sang to Chen Shuang He, *"Why take it seriously?"*

Why take it seriously?

He looked at the rich young lady seated on the VIP seat with the corner of his eye. Ning Ning cracked open a mocking smile. That smile woke the rich young lady up. She gave her confidant a slap to wake them up, they covered their face and left in a hurry.

Ning Ning looked back, her eyes fixed on Chen Shuang He who had an uneasy expression on his face.

Chen Shuang He frantically waved his hand behind his back.

Dancers dressed in white entered like a river, there were bamboo embroidered on their white costumes. They circled the two of them with their dance, it looked like the two were surrounded by sticks and sticks of bamboo, deep in the courtyard.

"Ah, Miss !" Chen Shuang He pretended to be surprised. "So this is where you were, I was looking for you everywhere."

He suddenly looked to his left and right. He plucked a branch filled with bamboo leaves from behind him and smiled shyly. "I just chanced to break off this branch from a weeping willow in the garden. You are so deeply versed in works of literature, I should like you to compose a poem to honor it."

Originally, she should have been secretly pleased and turned around to say in a low voice, "I have never seen this young man in my life, what is he doing here?"

Ning Ning gazed at him calmly instead, looking as if she was smiling, "Who are you here for?"

Chen Shuang He was taken aback for a moment. He glanced at the

rich young lady in the audience with the corner of his eyes, then told Ning Ning with a gentle tone, "I am here for you, Lady, I am dying of love for you!"¹

A rendition of <<A Walk in the Garden>>² enthralled the audience, like they had fallen into a dream. It felt like Du Li Niang³ and Liu Meng Mei⁴ had gone through time and space to appear in front of them and reenact their eternal love.

Even Chen Shuang He's eyes were getting blurry. He seemed to have forgotten his original intention as he indulged in the play, indulged in his role.

"I am the partner born of the fairest line, for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past." He sang affectionately to Ning Ning, *"Everywhere I have searched in compassion for you, secluded in your chamber. Lady, come with me just over there where we can talk."*

That was an expression she had seen before, it looked extremely like how Shi Zhong Tang looked at her whenever she looked up.

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment, she felt some admiration and some gratification: You have already acted out the essence of Lu Yun He.

Lu Yun He was a mediocre person. After working hard, he had not achieved anything, he did odd jobs in the troupe for many years. He was already a senior by their standards, but he was still making mistakes in the little things, which resulted in him getting scolded by the troupe leader and mocked by the newcomers. Life was so painful, his only joy was to act, his only obsession was acting.

...Hold on, isn't that me?

Ning Ning was taken aback for a moment, but she did not show it on her face. She turned to her side and let out a laugh. "Where do you mean?"

At this moment, Chen Shuang He's Lu Yun He had been completely possessed. He had completely forgotten about the rich young lady, every movement made by the lady in front of him strung his heart along. He hastily twirled up to her, the willow twig in his hand pointed to the right. "There, just beyond this railing peony, lined against the..."

Compared to the mortal world, a person like Lu Yun He was more suited to live in a play. He was better at living in a play, because life was simply too bitter and tiring for him. He could become another person on stage. A pauper or a noble, someone old or someone young,

someone attractive or someone ugly—he could become anyone on stage, fall in love with a person and also be loved by everyone...be loved by the audience. He loved the stage, it was the only place in which he could lose himself and find happiness...*but isn't that me?*

Then who am I?

"Against the...against the..." Chen Shuang He stammered suddenly, then shouted at her, "Run quickly!!"

At the same time there was a commotion among the audience seats.

"Ah!!"

"It's a gun!!"

"What happened?"

The rich young lady's confidant had led a group of people in, the muzzles of their guns were aimed at the stage.

Most people had already scattered, but the rich young lady remained on her seat. Both her hands were clenched tightly into fists, her voice had a trace of a sob as she said to Chen Shuang He who was on the stage, "Get over here quickly!"

Chen Shuang He shook his head. He stretched his hands out and stood in front of Ning Ning to protect her, shouting at her with his back to her, "Get out of here quickly!"

A chuckle, a pair of hands reached out behind him and wrapped themselves around him.

"You love me." Ning Ning said behind him.

Chen Shuang He's body stiffened for a moment, then he relaxed, as if he was accepting his fate. "...Yes."

"You chose me." Ning Ning said again.

"No!!" The rich young lady screamed and ran towards the stage, but she was held back by her confidant from behind.

"...Yes." Chen Shuang He slowly turned his head back, the face was his, but his expression was that of Liu Meng Mei gazing at Du Li Niang, it was like a dream, a fantasy, it was like he had been bewitched. "I choose you."

Ning Ning gazed at him, the trace of a tear sparkled at the corner of her eyes.

This was a victory that belonged to the phantom.

Because she understood him. He was a person of the plays, once a play began, he would turn into the person he was portraying, then fall in love with another person from the play. If the play hadn't ended, the love wouldn't have ended. They would become Du Li Niang and Liu Meng Mei, living in < < A Dream in the Garden > > forever.

Ning Ning slowly looked towards the audience seats. Most of the extras were gone, most of the masked people were gone as well, her eyes fixed themselves on Shi Zhong Tang...she knew what he had told the masked people now.

"Run quickly!"

—That was not Chen Shuang He's shout.

A crew member rushed in as he coughed, thick smoke followed him in, he said anxiously, "*Cough*, there's a fire."

Just as his voice droned out, a masked person quickly walked in behind him. With a click, the lighter in their hand was lit up, then with a forceful toss, the lighter was thrown towards the stage.

Red curtains, red flames, screams rang out on and off the stage. Afterwards, there was the sound of a flurry of footsteps.

Chen Shuang He also started to run, then he looked back. Seeing Ning Ning who was still standing on stage dumbfounded, looking straight at Shi Zhong Tang.

Shi Zhong Tang held the armrests of the chair with both his hands as he slowly stood up, he sang, "*I am the partner born of the fairest line, for whom you wait as the river of years rolls past.*"

The world's most moving voice, the world's most affectionate voice, singing for her alone.

"Everywhere I have searched in compassion for you, secluded in your chamber."

"There, just beyond this railing, peony lined against the mound of weather Tai-hu rocks..."

Accompanied by his singing, he slowly walked from the audience seat up to the stage, walking up in front of her.

Ning Ning closed her eyes for a moment, then with her trembling lips she said, "The masked people did not immediately kill me, because you told them..."

She opened her eyes and stared at him, "Today, I will become one of you."

1This entire play was an actual Chinese play , I basically took the translation from page 47 and 48 of this book.

2An act of the play.

3Du Li Niang is a fictional character from Tang Xianzu's play *The Peony Pavilion*.

4Liu Meng Mei is the main fictionalized character within Tang Xianzu's play *The Peony Pavilion*, "Liu" meaning 'willow' and "Meng Mei" 'dream of plum'.

E/N: Hi guys, a little announcement. Seeing as there are only 3 chapters left (and we loathe to make you guys suffer the long cliffhanger), we will do mass release of all three chapters on Sunday! But, there will be no release on this Friday. Look forward to Sunday!

Chapter 172

172: Leader

Today was yet another day of leading a befuddled existence in a drunken stupor.

Cui Hong Mei laid on her sofa, her fingertips pinching a stick of cigarette. She asked the young meat who was sitting beside her, "Why did you cut your hair?"

The young meat did not even look up as he continued to play 'Honour of Kings'1. "Does it look good? This style has been trending recently."

"Good my ass, it looks like a toilet cover." Cui Hong Mei took out a few pieces of notes and threw them at him. "Quickly go fix it!"

"Okay, okay, okay." The young meat put the notes in his pocket with one hand while he tapped on his phone repeatedly with the other. He grumbled, feeling unsatisfied, "Such an old-fashioned hairstyle, my friends laughed at me saying that I looked like someone from the seventies, I don't even know what you like about it."

Cui Hong Mei looked at him, she slowly blew out a puff of smoke.

Shallow, greedy, ignorant and incompetent.

If she were to try and point out something good about him, it would probably be that his side profile when he looked down looked extremely like Ning Qing.

With her true lover out of reach, she could at least keep someone who looked like him around her. She was already old, her memory was already beginning to deteriorate. If she didn't do this, if she didn't look at him, she was afraid that she would eventually forget what Ning Qing looked like.

But he was not him after all.

Cui Hong Mei sighed in her heart again. Just as she was about to put the cigarette between her fingers to her mouth, the sound of someone knocking on her door suddenly rang out—*thump, thump, thump!*

"Who is it?" Cui Hong Mei asked, but the only thing that answered

her was a more frantic knocking.

Cui Hong Mei and the young meat exchanged a look, then she said, "Go take a look."

"No, I'm not going." The young meat immediately rejected her. He continued to hold the phone, the sound effects of a fierce battle rang out from the phone. "My next match has begun."

What a useless person. Cui Hong Mei cursed in her heart, she went over to open the door herself.

Only a crack opened in the door before the other party squirmed in like an eel. He then immediately locked the door behind him and wiped the blood and sweat on his face, panting a little as he said to her, "Madam Cui, long time no see."

"You, you..." Looking at the state he was in, Cui Hong Mei regretted opening the door. She scanned him for a moment before she cautiously asked, "Who are you?"

Wen Yu was stunned for a moment, then said with a bitter laugh, "I forgot, the two of us don't know each other yet."

"..." Cui Hong Mei's eyes glistened more, what did he mean by 'don't know each other yet'? This fellow looked like he was putting on airs, but he was actually insane.

The knocking sounds were still ringing out repeatedly, it didn't sound like a single person was knocking, it sounded like a few people were punching and kicking the door.

Wen Yu glanced back, then said to Cui Hong Mei, "There's not much time, can I please borrow something from you?"

"I don't have money!" Cui Hong Mei said reflexively.

"Please lend me the owner's mask." Wen Yu reached out and pressed on her shoulder.

Cui Hong Mei took two steps back from getting pushed by him. She twisted her shoulder free from his hands all of a sudden and quickly ran back to the door. She opened a crack in the door before she quickly closed it shut again, the knocking from outside stopped for a moment before it rang out again.

Cui Hong Mei Leaned on the door, her face turned a little pale, looking a little absent-minded. "There's...no one outside."

There was no one, but the knocking continued.

"Masked people," Wen Yu said, "they are here to catch me."

Masked people. Cui Hong Mei was taken aback. She had not heard of that phrase for a very very long time, when was the last time?

...It was the Ning Family Village ancestor worship ceremony.

Cui Hong Mei's face darkened. "Why are they trying to catch you?"

"Because they don't want me to save Ning Ning." Wen Yu said seriously, "Because of the masked people, because of Life Theater, you have already lost a husband and a daughter. Do you want to lose the last of your loved ones too?"

"Ning Qing is my only loved one!" Cui Hong Mei said coldly. She turned her head abruptly to look at the young man that was sneakily making a call, roaring, "No calling the police! Go and play your game!"

The young man was so scared that his shoulder shrunk. He hung up the phone and went back to his room to play Honour of Kings.

"...Ning Yu Ren and Ning Ning are both my piggy banks, not my loved ones." Cui Hong Mei took out a wooden box from her cabinet. She stuffed it into Wen Yu's hands and said stiffly, "So go ahead if you want to save her, I will not be saving her."

The box was opened. Fangs on all sides, ferocious and terrifying—the owner's mask that had been sealed in the dust for a long time.

"Do you know how to use it?"

"I do." Wen Yu said as he reached into the box to take the mask up. He took a deep breath and blew the dust off the owner's mask.

Life Theater, its original name was Life Opera House.

It could grow or shrink. When it was small, it would be placed in a wooden box, the past owners would bring it along with them.

It was up until a certain owner's death that the wooden box was split up into four pieces. The Ning Family village obtained one of the pieces, they created an elaborate owner mask out of it. Although a lot of its functions were lost, it at least had the most basic function—evocation, it was able to summon Life Theater from wherever it was located.

"The method to start it up is very simple, give it enough anger." As Wen Yu finished speaking, he slowly put the mask on his face.

He didn't know when it started, the people around him called him

"Father" jokingly. They thought that the place he was most suited to be at was not the clinic, but a church.

He would ignore the enemy in front of him, he would not go up and kiss the lover in front of him either. He once had an ambiguous relationship with a woman, but in the end, the other party chose to back up, she said, "Sorry, I can't be together with you. You make me feel...that I'm together with a statue of an angel in a church."

Holy, cold, giving equal treatment to everyone.

...She was wrong. He was not an angel, he was but a mortal. If he loved a person deeply, he would still walk up and kiss the person. If he hated a person deeply, he would still rush up with rage and fists.

"You can hurt me, but you cannot hurt her..." The emotions that had welled up in his heart erupted like a volcano, shattering all the reservations and control he had. Wen Yu let out a long roar, "Big Brother!!!"

What responded to this roar was violent winds. With a whoosh, it blew opened all the windows, inexhaustible white fog rushed in.

Wen Yu who was wearing a mask looked over. All he saw was thick fog billowing outside the window, countless cars had stopped in a crooked manner on the road, countless pedestrians had screamed as they ran, countless windows were opened as heads peeked out of them.

"What happened? Why is there suddenly so much fog?"

"Look, what's that?"

"Mama, the mask that uncle is wearing is so cute."

The biggest difference between using the mask and using a movie ticket was that—for a short period of time, the boundary between the mortal realm and the movie theater would be extinguished.

Tonight, normal people could also see Life Theater, they could also see the figures in the thick fog.

After a slight shock, one of those figures walked out of the fog—Mr. Rabbit.

He walked up to a mother and daughter pair then bent down and smiled at the little girl. "Do you think the mask that Uncle is wearing is cute?"

The little girl hugged her mother's leg, she nodded at him shyly.

"Do you want one?"

The little girl nodded again.

"Then come in." Rabbit Mask suddenly grabbed the little girl's hand. He laughed out loud as he ran towards the theater. "Uncle guarantees that after you go in, you would very quickly get an even cuter mask!"

"Wait! Where are you bringing my daughter?" The little girl's mother chased after them frantically, the three of them rushed into the fog in a straight line. Amidst the vague fog, the sound of the doors opening rang out.

"Welcome!!" A dog mask jumped out in front of a couple, he saw that the two of them were holding movie tickets. "Are you going to the movies? I've already seen < <My Super Handsome Boyfriend> > ? It's not good at all. Why not come to our place? I guarantee..."

He started laughing, his laughter sounded even more suspicious amidst the fog. "What we're screening now is definitely something you have never seen before. Come, come..."

Either by force or temptation, the masked people brought people to the movie theater one by one.

"You cannot go in!" Ning Ning shouted at the couple, but Shi Zhong Tang covered her mouth.

"Shhh." He held her in his arms and shushed her quietly.

The hand that was pressing down on her slowly moved away, Ning Ning asked, "...Why are you doing this?"

"Compared to getting killed by masked people, isn't it better to become one of us?" Shi Zhong Tang said with a trace of apologetic tone, "No matter how I thought about it, I could only think of such a compromise."

"..." Ning Ning stared at him. Really?

"Really, I've tried my best." Shi Zhong Tang sighed again. "I cannot stop everyone, I can't watch them kill you, that's even worse. This is the only way you can live. For them, after you become a masked person, you will have no reason to look for a doorman to guard yourself."

...What he was saying sounded logical, but...

"...Then what are they doing?" Ning Ning looked at the masked people who were pulling customers in. "Don't they just want me to become a masked person? Why are they dragging others in as well?"

"Because...isn't it too lonely?"

"What?"

"Not being able to be seen, not being able to be heard, relatives gradually getting old, gradually getting forgotten by our lover."

Shi Zhong Tang laughed with a little desolation. "Just like how my movie screened twelve times, I fell in love with you twelve times, I lost you twelve times...Ning Ning, masked people are all very lonely, so..."

He slowly looked at his surroundings, the masked people around him who were trying their best to solicit customers, their happy laughter and cheerful voices masked the true expressions underneath their masks.

"...They won't kill anyone anymore." Shi Zhong Tang murmured, "If we were to kill, why not just turn everyone into masked people? Once that day arrives, there will be nothing to differentiate humans and masked people, time would also not be a barrier anymore..."

The more Ning Ning listened, the more her heart grew cold. She gazed at Shi Zhong Tang for half a moment before she suddenly let out a bitter laugh. "Someone else had also made the same speech..."

She Zhong Tang looked back with a smile, "Who was it?"

Ning Ning pursed her trembling lips, she said as she teared up abruptly. "The future...leader of the masked people."

In the future, there was a lonely masked person.

No one knew what she had gone through, all they knew was that after < < Phantom of the Theater > > ended, she became the leader of the masked people.

Or maybe it could be said that the masked people acknowledged her philosophy. "We are not monsters, we are also humans. Humans get lonely, so we want to expand our group. Think of ways to turn everyone into a masked person. Once that day arrives, there will be nothing to differentiate humans and masked people, time would also not be a barrier anymore..."

A battle was fought, Earth fell to ruins.

Ning Ning didn't want that kind of future, so she did not become the leader of the masked people.

But, the leader was still born.

1This is a popular mobile moba game in China.

Chapter 173

173: Don't Abandon Me

"Big Brother!!" A raging voice suddenly rang out, piercing the white fog like a sharp knife.

Ning Ning looked back, it was Wen Yu.

Wen Yu rushed over. Brothers who had not met for decades, the first thing he did upon meeting him was to throw a punch at him.

"What did you promise me?" Wen Yu said with rage, "You said you wouldn't let her down!"

"...What do you know?" Shi Zhong Tang turned his beaten up back at him. He reached out and grabbed his collar then pulled Wen Yu up in front of himself, saying angrily, "Look at me! Look closely! Stop making sarcastic remarks! If you were to turn into my current state, you wouldn't be better than me!!"

The obscure white fog, from a distance, all one could see were shadows.

Now that he was up close, he was able to see the mask on his face clearly, along with his white sideburns.

Wen Yu was stunned for a moment. "Big Brother...what happened to your hair?"

Shi Zhong Tang gave him a shove. He reached out to grab Ning Ning's hand, pulled her and started to run towards the theater.

"Shi Tou Ge, why...did you turn old?"

Shi Zhong Tang suddenly paused in his tracks.

He could not help but grab a bunch of his hair, it was half black and half white. Hold on...he flipped his right hand around, his eyes gradually widened. He saw wrinkles gradually appear on the back of his hand, like rings getting added on to an old tree.

"...Ahhh!" Shi Zhong Tang looked down and wailed. The sad and shrill wail gradually turned into laughter, he laughed out as he looked back at Ning Ning and said, "Yes, I'm already old, so what?"

He dragged Ning Ning into the deep parts of the fog, laughing as he

walked. "Don't worry, the mask on my face can't be removed, you don't have to see my old and ugly face!"

Ning Ning staggered behind him, looking at his back absent-mindedly with disbelief.

Anxious, self-abased, raging, unreconciled...she had never seen this side of Shi Zhong Tang.

"Why did you age?" She murmured, "Doesn't masked people stop aging..."

"Disappointed?" Shi Zhong Tang said without looking at her, "It's useless even if you're disappointed. If you could live to a hundred years, you would have to be with me for a hundred years. If you could live for a hundred days, you would have to be with me for a hundred days. Life in the morning, death in the evening...this was what you have promised me!"

Every word turned into a chain, Shi Zhong Tang's hands turned into a cold and heavy chain, cuffing Ning Ning's wrists tightly, dragging her along.

"Big Brother!" Wen Yu caught up again.

Shi Zhong Tang cursed under his breath. He pulled Ning Ning behind him then faced Wen Yu and asked, "What else do you want?"

Wen Yu stared at him for a moment before he let out a quiet sigh. "I'm sorry."

Shi Zhong Tang cocked his eyebrows.

"...Previously, I didn't realise the state your body was in, so I said a lot of harmful comments. I'm sorry." Wen Yu took one step forward and looked at him with concern. "What's wrong with your body? Can I help you?"

Shi Zhong Tang took a step back instead and let out a mocking laugh, "Ha, what are you hoping for? Are you hoping that I'm not a masked person?"

Wen Yu stopped in his tracks.

"*Your body is not old, but your mental state is.* You were half right with that statement. The truth is my mental state is old, but so is my body. If I don't return to the theater quickly, I will get older and older, in the end, I will turn into what my actual age is." Shi Zhong Tang said sarcastically, "Besides this point, you were right about the other things you said, you were completely right."

Wen Yu looked at him silently.

"I am the person you said I am." Shi Zhong Tang retreated into the deep end of the fog step by step, grinning. "I cannot live a stagnant life, I have to have something to do, but a hellhole like Life Theater doesn't give me much of a choice. I cannot pursue a career nor can I pursue my dreams..."

He briefly looked back and gazed at Ning Ning behind him, saying gently, "I can only pursue you."

Bang.

Wen Yu pounced at him like a jaguar the moment he looked back. Amidst Ning Ning's screams, he flung him to the ground, a punch landing on Shi Zhong Tang's face as he roared with rage, "Enough! Stop speaking!"

"Haha! What are you afraid of? Are you afraid of hurting your Aunt Xiao Ning?" Shi Zhong Tang laid supine on the ground. He suddenly looked at Ning Ning and gently said, "Ning Ning, this fellow should really become a movie critic. Do you know how he looks at us? He said that I didn't watch < > repeatedly to watch you, it was to watch myself instead. An old fellow who doesn't want to admit my age, trying my best to act as a younger version of myself. He saw through it, but you didn't. You love me in the movie..."

"No..." Wen Yu looked at Ning Ning's expression out of reflex.

The reason Shi Zhong Tang said so much was to bait Wen Yu into doing this. He immediately used all his might to flip Wen Yu onto the ground. Punch after punch, he beat Wen Yu up mercilessly.

"Looking at your highfalutin air disgusts me!"

"You think you are Jesus Christ? The entire human race is waiting for you to save them?"

"Living for others your entire life, in the end you intend to die for another person as well?"

"Heh, heh. Mr. Saint, do you want me to send you off?"

Shi Zhong Tang was hitting and scolding Wen Yu joyfully, he finally grabbed Wen Yu's collar and pulled him off the ground. He stared at the bruised face and said coldly, "...Why don't you fight back?"

The reason he could hit as much as he wanted was not because he was stronger than Wen Yu, it was because Wen Yu had stopped

resisting halfway through, allowing his fists to rain down on his face.

"...Have you calmed down now?" Wen Yu said with a right eye so bruised that only a slit could open. "Then come back."

Shi Zhong Tang's eyebrow twitched, he raised his fist before he finally slowly put it down.

"...You really are a saint." He loosened his fingers and tossed Wen Yu to the ground. He stood up straight and said with a sarcastic tone, "You're still thinking of me in this situation."

He started walking towards Ning Ning then suddenly stopped and looked back.

"Big Brother..." Wen Yu was so hurt that he could not get up, his fingers held onto the ends of his pants as he begged, "Don't pull her back into hell..."

Shi Zhong Tang looked at him with a complicated expression for a moment before he pulled his leg away and walked step by step towards Ning Ning.

"I thought you would run away." He smiled.

Ning Ning folded her arms, slowly looking up at him with a very strange expression. "Let's go."

She walked forward in the theater's direction.

Shi Zhong Tang was taken aback. He took off after her and asked with a smile, "Why did you suddenly change your mind?"

Ning Ning, "..."

She did not answer, she only continued to walk forward. In contrast, the smile on Shi Zhong Tang's face gradually disappeared. He started breathing harder and harder, the two columns of lanterns fluttered in front of his eyes. She walked up the steps one by one and slowly pushed the door open, he finally could not take it anymore.

"Wait a minute!" Shi Zhong Tang pulled her back.

Ning Ning looked up at him and sneered. "Why did you suddenly change your mind?"

Shi Zhong Tang, "..."

"Let go," Ning Ning said coldly, "I want to go in."

After a moment of silence, Shi Zhong Tang smiled. "You can't wait to become a masked person?"

"I will not become a masked person."

"Haha, that's such a funny joke."

"Facts speak louder than words! It's not my first time going into the theater. After so many visits, I have yet to become a masked person..."

"*Ptooeey*. When did you not escape with a breadth of your hair? those were also when you had a ticket..."

After a pause, Shi Zhong Tang stared at Ning Ning and said, "...You are doing this deliberately? You're planning to sneak in?"

"What else?" Ning Ning said coldly. As the two of them were speaking, two more normal people were dragged into the theater by a masked person. "I can't beat you, neither can I beat the other masked people. If all of you want to kill me, I can't fight back. You beat up Wen Yu in front of me, I cannot stop you either...I can only do what I can do, which is also what I'm good at."

"You plan to sneak in?" Shi Zhong Tang said sarcastically, "You saw the consequences of sneaking in."

"I know," Ning Ning laughed out loud, "so what?"

She suddenly clawed at his face as if she had gone mad. She naturally could not get to his face as there was a mask in the way, she would hurt her nails instead, so she clawed his neck, she clawed everywhere she could leave a mark on.

"Sneak in to change my fate!" Ning Ning stared at him with burning eyes. Before tears could fall, she smiled, as the one who could smile would look like the victor. "You or another masked person will change my life to that of a failure. I might be a third class actress all my life, I might not even be able to be an actress anymore... It doesn't matter. It's best that I don't even enter the movie theater, it's best that I don't even act in < <The Person within the Painting> >."

Shi Zhong Tang looked at her speechless.

"...Without < <The Person within the Painting> >, there would not be you and me today." Ning Ning said in a low face, her expression hidden in the shadow. "Then maybe, everything today wouldn't happen..."

"...Impossible." Shi Zhong Tang finally found his voice back, saying stiffly, "You will act even if you have to be forced to do so."

Ning Ning laughed coldly. "The movie I don't want to act in, I'll flare up my nostrils, see if the director would still pick me at the

auditions."

"The others will act worse than you."

"You want to put laxatives in the tea of others? Sure, sure, sure, go ahead. Drug the tea of the actresses of the entire country if you can. How's that? Can you do that?"

"..."

"I know that you won't be able to do it." Ning Ning pretended to be casual as she laughed. "Actually, it doesn't matter who acts in < < The Person within the Painting > >, you're watching yourself anyway. Alright...let go!"

Accompanied by a hysterical shout, Ning Ning used all of her strength to break free of Shi Zhong Tang's hand, then rushed towards the entrance without hesitation.

But she bumped into someone's chest.

Shi Zhong Tang had rushed over like a bat out of hell, slamming his back on the entrance and blocking her with his chest, his head hung very low as he said quietly, "That's not it..."

"Move!"

"Not just anyone can do it..."

"Get lost!"

"..."

The masked person with white sideburns slowly raised his head, he smiled to please, yet his tears were flowing, glittering and crystal clear, it made the jade mask wet.

"I'm sorry." He wanted to rip off the hateful white hair. His raised hands quickly fell back down, they continued to spread out to block the door behind him. He cried as he said, "I'm sorry I turned into an old monster with a bad temper...but...I beg of you...don't abandon me..."

Having said that, he hung his head low without holding on to any hope. He suppressed his sobs into his heart, only his shoulder was trembling ever so slightly.

"...What?" Ning Ning looked at him for a moment, the victorious smile slowly faded away from her face. She reached out and hugged him. Both sides had suffered losses, tears were flowing down her face. "I don't like you because of your age, so of course I would not stop

liking you because of your white hair."

Shi Zhong Tang looked up ever so slightly. In his eyes that had fallen into darkness, a light lit up a little once again. Like a black lake in which the dark clouds had parted, a ray of moonlight shining on it.

"It's almost twelve, why are you two still here?"

An unfamiliar voice suddenly rang out.

Ning Ning looked back and saw a hand reaching out to push her. A masked person stood behind her and said, "Let me give you a hand."

In the next second, the masked person fell to the ground after getting punched.

The other party was stunned for a moment before they flew into a rage. "Shi Zhong Tang, what are you doing?"

"You go ahead." Shi Zhong Tang threw another punch at him, he hit them so hard that they bent over and coughed so hard that they could not speak in full sentences. "I'll catch up later."

Although that masked person could not speak, it was almost twelve, the movie was about to start tonight, masked people were coming back one after another. Upon seeing this scene, one of them screamed, "Someone! Someone! Quickly! Ning Ning is about to escape! She's going to find a doorman to catch us!"

Shi Zhong Tang rushed over frantically, "Why aren't you leaving?"

Ning Ning looked at him with hesitation.

"Bring Wen Yu along with you," Shi Zhong Tang said, "he knows where to look for a doorman."

"...Alright." Ning Ning could only turn around and run. After she took a few steps, she turned back and shouted, "You promised, you have to come back!"

"I will."

She took two more steps before she stopped again. She turned back and shouted, "You're really not lying to me?"

"Why did you stop again?! *Sigh*, how about this? If I'm lying, you can punish me by ditching me, I'll be single for the rest of my life."

Since he made such a vow, it looked like he would come back even if he had to crawl back.

Ning Ning finally did not look back this time.

When she found Wen Yu, he had already gotten up from the ground, hobbling in the direction the two of them had left in. Seeing Ning Ning coming towards him, he was taken aback. "Where's my brother?"

Ning Ning rushed over and put his arm over her own shoulder. "Let's quickly go, he will be coming later."

"What happened?" Just as Wen Yu finished asking, he heard an uproar rang out around him. He looked back, figures upon figures were chasing after them from within the fog, shouting, "I see her! I see her!"

"Why is there one more person?"

"Catch them both! Or kill them both!"

The two of them started running frantically. They ran forward, there were masked people. They ran to the left, there were masked people. They ran to the right, there were masked people. There were even more masked people behind them.

It was as if all the masked people were chasing after them—threateningly, ferociously, surrounding the two of them, it was like a battle of trapped animals.

Victory was clearly in sight, but they suddenly receded like a tide.

The two of them remained rooted to the ground dumbfoundedly, they didn't even have the time to wipe the sweat off their heads.

"...Why did they scatter all of a sudden?" Ning Ning asked in doubt, she was abruptly shocked. She quickly turned around to look in the direction of the theater and said with a trembling voice, "You liar."

Twelve o'clock, Life Theater.

With a creak, the doors suddenly opened, one person entered.

The theater was in chaos, most of the masked people had already left, only a few of them were left, along with the normal people they had under control.

Amidst the cries of the normal people, the theme song started playing, accompanied by the sad and tender serenade. Shi Zhong Tang walked step by step up to the screen, he looked up and smiled.

"I, Shi Zhong Tang, an incompetent brother, a boyfriend who has just been ditched, a person who doesn't keep his word, a fellow who is even disliked by my own family," he said with a smile, "am willing to become the doorman."

Chapter 174

174: Life Theater

"Liar! Liar! Liar!" Ning Ning scolded as she ran back. "You liar! You did not intend to come back at all!"

Everyone knew the reason masked people had left. There must be a person, a person who fulfilled all the requirements, who was willing to become the doorman.

Rather than it be you, why not let it be me?

"I'm right here!!" Ning Ning stopped behind a group of masked people, they blocked the entrance of the movie theater. Like a fleet of motorcycles blocking off a junction, the people outside could not get in, the people inside could not get out. She took a deep breath and shouted at them, "Didn't you want to catch me? Do it quickly, otherwise I'm going to run away!"

A few of them took a look back at her before they continued to squeeze with the crowd.

"...Why are you all not coming to catch me?" Ning Ning walked towards them. Suddenly, her arm tightened, she was dragged back by Wen Yu.

Ning Ning struggled repeatedly and was slapped across the face by him.

"Calm down!" Wen Yu roared at her.

Ning Ning held her face, a stinging pain.

"Big brother didn't let you down." Wen Yu pressed on her shoulders and said with a heavy expression, "...Don't let him down either."

The air was filled with the smell of blood, along with the laughter of the masked people.

"Traitor!"

"Kill him, kill him!"

"Beautifully done!"

"Let me deal the final blow!"

"What are you waiting for?" Wen Yu grabbed Ning Ning's hand, "Start running!"

"...Ahhh!!" Ning Ning started running along with him. She cried herself hoarse due to her efforts being in vain as she ran.

Why were humans so weak? Why was she so weak? She could not even save the person she liked the most, she could not do anything at the crucial juncture, she could only run away like a disowned dog.

The commotion behind her continued, the killing in the movie theater continued, until a voice said...

"It's over."

The commotion stopped, the crowd gradually dispersed. A few combative masked people exited the theater, leading them was Rabbit Mask, holding a jade mask in his hand.

A jade mask with eyes that were peach coloured at the corners.

He tossed the jade mask to the ground and let out a cold laugh, then stared at Ning Ning's back and said, "Next."

Boom, boom—footsteps rang out, like ten thousand horses galloping behind Ning Ning and Wen Yu.

"Hurry up!" Wen Yu shouted, "They are catching up."

At first, Ning Ning was filled with joy, then it was followed by tears. She looked back and muttered, "They would not let him off and come after me, Shi Tou Ge..."

You said you would come back, but none of the masks that were chasing after me were you.

None of those were your...jade mask with peach colour on its eyes.

As they ran to the entrance of an alley, Wen Yu turned and rushed into the alley. There was a rope above his head, a blanket was hanging out to dry on the rope. With a gust of the wind, it fell and covered them. The blanket was snow white to the point where it melded in with the fog. Wen Yu hugged Ning Ning and curled under the blanket, the footsteps on the outside split into two groups, one group entered the alley and ran past them.

After the footsteps had gotten farther away from them, Wen Yu tossed the blanket aside, pulling Ning Ning and running out of the alley.

"Hold on." Ning Ning asked, "Where are we going?"

They were clearly going in the direction they came from.

"The other routes are blocked off," Wen Yu said, "there's only one route left—we'll go back to Life Theater."

"Good idea!" Ning Ning's eyes sparkled, her face was full of expectations, her voice sounded excited, "Shi Tou *Ge* must be waiting for us there!"

Wen Yu's footsteps paused for a moment, he acknowledged her with his back to her.

Ning Ning followed him silently for a few steps before she suddenly wept. "...You're lying."

Wen Yu was taken aback, he looked back at her.

"Shi Tou *Ge* lied to me, you're also lying to me." Ning Ning's face was filled with tears, she choked out, "You're not going back to look for him... You're the same as him, you want to go back to become the doorman."

Wen Yu opened his mouth, then he sighed. He pressed down on the center of his eyebrows and muttered impatiently, "Big Brother is indeed better at things like lying, I was seen through in an instant."

"You're not allowed to go!" Ning Ning hugged his arm and cried. "If you can't run, I'll hold you up. We'll leave together or find a place to hide, we'll wait till the sun rises up and for the police to arrive..."

"Even when the sun rises, the masked people won't disappear. Even if the police arrive, they cannot see them." Wen Yu laughed in spite of himself, he touched the tears on her face and said with pity. "...There must be a doorman."

"Don't even think about it."

Wen Yu and Ning Ning were both taken aback, then they both looked in front of them cautiously.

Rabbit Mask walked out of the fog, four men followed behind him, each of them looked as fierce as fiends, they were emitting an aura similar to that of desperados.

"I knew there was a possibility of you two coming back." Rabbit Mask took out a dagger and laughed coldly. "I was waiting for you."

He lowered his body and rushed at them. He wanted to use the dagger in his hand to stab Wen Yu's chest, but Wen Yu turned to his side, the dagger cut his elbow. The moment the knife fell to the ground, his knee hit Rabbit Mask's stomach.

As Rabbit Mask was retching, Wen Yu bent over and picked up the dagger, saying, "Thanks... Go hide!"

His first words were aimed at Rabbit Mask, his next words were aimed at Ning Ning.

Ning Ning frantically turned around and ran towards the sidewalk. A number of shops were open by the sidewalk, their lights were turned on, but there was no one in them, they had all run away. She seemed to have just rushed into a convenience store and closed the door when Rabbit Mask pounced on the door, staring at her with bloodshot eyes through the glass door.

"Ignore her!" The masked people who were attacking Wen Yu shouted, "Come help quickly, this fellow is very difficult to deal with!"

"...Coming!" Rabbit Mask answered but he did not immediately return to help, he looked at his surroundings for a moment instead. He brought a bicycle that was parked on the sidewalk over, then used it to blockade the entrance of the convenience store. He smiled viciously at Ning Ning. "Wait here, you're next."

There was no way Ning Ning would sit back and do nothing.

She turned around and went back to the convenience store. The store was not big, all sorts of snacks were placed on three wooden shelves. There was a handful of change on the counter, a small pot of *oden* along with two rice balls.

Did the customer and the storekeeper run away? Ning Ning entered the staff area. Luckily, she found a window there. It was not welded with anti-theft measures, on the other side of the window was another sidewalk.

The window was not big, Ning Ning was thankful that she was an actress by profession—a profession which made her always be on (a strict) diet.

She took off her top, trying her best to reduce her body mass. Ning Ning crawled out of the window. After she fell to the ground, she looked around hesitantly, then gritted her teeth and ran towards the theater.

She wouldn't be of any use by staying put.

"There's only one thing I can do..." Ning Ning thought as she ran.

When they came, they came in a pair.

When they escaped, they escaped in a pair.

And now she was the only one remaining.

As she ran and ran, the sound of pursuers suddenly rang out behind her. She heard Rabbit Mask shouting with exasperation, "I see her! She's in front! In front! Go after her!"

Her tears blurred her vision, they were coming after her, then Wen Yu...

A hand reached out behind her and viciously grabbed her hand.

Ning Ning cried out in pain, but she did not stop running, she ran even faster instead. She left the other party with a handful of hair with a bloodstained scalp.

The fog was billowing like the waves in the ocean, Life Theater was right in front of her.

"I'm not going to let you prevail!" Rabbit Mask pounced on her from behind and caused her to fall to the ground.

"Let go!!" Ning Ning was held down by Rabbit Mask, she could not stand up at all, she could only lie on the ground and try her best to struggle. She used both her arms and legs to crawl towards the theater, tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn't want to not be able to do anything besides crying, she didn't want to not be able to save anyone besides crying, there was only one thing she could do, there was one thing she must do...

Her fingers finally touched the steps in front of the theater entrance, but countless footsteps rang out behind her. Ning Ning looked up and shouted at the entrance of the theater, "I volunteer to be the doorman! I volunteer to be the doorman!!"

The door remained firmly shut, there was not a hint of an answer at all.

Instead, the footsteps of the masked people were getting closer and closer, louder and louder.

A trace of despair flashed across Ning Ning's eyes. Had she failed? She had already gotten here, she was just missing the final step. She screamed at the theater, "Let me be the doorman! You said it, I fulfill the requirements. I can become the doorman! Let me, I beg you, let me!!"

"We've caught up!" A flurry of footsteps, the large number of masked people had finally caught up.

A foot was raised up high then stepped forcefully on Ning Ning's

hand, it twisted from left to right as it grinded her hand down the step.

Ning Ning would rather die than to move her hand away. The sound of her bone breaking rang out, but she did not move it away, her face was filled with tears. She repeated that one sentence nonstop, "Let me be the doorman! Let me be the doorman..."

"That won't do."

The foot that was twisting left and right stopped, a masked person looked over, another masked person looked over, all the masked people looked over to the direction of the voice.

Ning Ning looked to the front dumbfoundedly.

"You cannot become the doorman..."

The doors to the theater slowly opened to the sides, an even thicker white fog seeped out from within, blocking everyone's vision, only a familiar and the world's most moving voice could be heard quietly beside Ning Ning's ear.

"Because..."

A mask appeared out of the thick fog, made of jade, with the corner of its eyes dyed in a resplendent peach colour.

"I'm already the doorman."

Accompanied with these words, inexhaustible fog billowed towards that mask. Long black hair grew out of it, slender limbs, a fit and healthy body—for the sake of battling and keeping watch over all the masked people, the theater would give you the strongest body!

"Quickly stop him!" Rabbit Mask howled.

No one paid any heed to Ning Ning anymore, they all howled and rushed at Shi Zhong Tang! Just as Rabbit Mask touched that mask with his hand...

Shi Zhong Tang slowly opened his eyes.

The peach coloured corner of his eyes suddenly coagulated into a peach blossom petal, it looked like a flower and a tear as it rolled down from the corner of his eye.

That was the peach blossom that had blossomed when we first met, it blossomed in my eyes, it blossomed in my heart.

Shi Zhong Tang was suddenly holding that petal. The petal turned into a hilt, a long sword quickly grew out of the hilt. One side of the

blade was still wrapped in quite a number of peach blossom branches. Shi Zhong Tang waved it, the branches shook, the petals were rich and diverse, a group of people including the Rabbit Mask grabbed their hands and screamed as they retreated.

"He's but one person!" Rabbit Mask held his hand that was injured once again exasperatedly. "He has but one sword...huh?"

A peach blossom twirled round and round as it drifted down in front of him.

Rabbit Mask slowly looked up.

It was unknown when it happened, but the sky was filled with peach blossoms.

With the flowers as hilts, swords slowly grew out of the center of the flowers. One by one, they filled up the sky, the tips of the sword were all aimed at the ground, dots of pallid light were shone into the pupils of every masked person.

"Ah... Ah..." Rabbit Mask was dumbstruck for a moment before he shouted out abruptly, "Run!!"

At the same time, the swords of flowers fell from the sky at the same time, like a radiant meteor shower.

Amidst the resplendent rays of lights, Shi Zhong Tang slowly walked up to Ning Ning. He squatted down and said, "Why are you trying so hard? you still have me, don't you?"

Ning Ning could not find any words, she could only let her tears flow continuously.

"Next time, you don't have to try this hard." Shi Zhong Tang touched her face and said with sadness, "I will protect you, no matter where I am, no matter what I am..."

Masks upon masks lost their bodies in the wake of the light, they fell to the ground with a clang. The sound that rang out one after another sounded like a requiem.

When the song ended, a laughter that sounded like a man and a woman, like an old and a young person rang out from within the movie theater.

"You have brought me the best doorman. Thank you, Ning Ning." He said, "I have gotten what I wanted, you will also get what you want."

Ning Ning was stunned for a moment, then she quickly said, "What

do you mean? Hold on! Shi Tou Ge, where are you going? Come back! Come back!!"

The thick fog gradually dissipated, the movie theater in the fog also gradually dissipated. Shi Zhong Tang looked at her lovingly, but his body gradually moved back.

"You promised!" Ning Ning screamed, "You will definitely come back!"

"Yes!" Shi Zhong Tang smiled at her, "So you definitely have to wait for me..."

Wait for...the day we meet again.

One year later.

"Here, Little Ning, have a taste of this tea."

Ning Ning took the hot tea out of the director's hands and took a sip, she asked, "When are we going to start filming?"

The other's face was full of embarrassment and awkwardness. "I've already told them to hurry, they said they will be here in five minutes."

Ning Ning smiled without saying a word. All the comments had already been said by the people within the crew.

"What kind of person is he, he's still not here after an hour, does he think he's some sort of big shot? Can he be compared to Ning Jie?"

"Is he looking for trouble? The moment Ning Jie gets angry, the male lead will definitely be someone else!"

"Switch him! It's best that they switch him with my prince charming Chen Shuang He, that's a couple I ship."

"Don't say that, I heard that Ning Jie has a boyfriend, someone from outside the business, a psychiatrist."

Five minutes later, the director looked down at his watch, then he left while he smiled with malice... He must have gone off to give people a scolding.

Ning Ning held the teacup in her hand as she sat on the chair absent-mindedly.

One year had passed unknowingly. The commotion the masked people had caused was once a hot topic, everyone said that the end of the world was here. But as time gone by, the people who talked about it grew fewer and fewer. This year, there were not many people who

remembered it.

She had also once gone back to 35 Rouge Street, only to find out that a breakfast shop had opened there. She asked the shopkeeper, she asked the people around it, everyone said that the breakfast shop had always been there and it had opened for a decade.

Everything was as if a dream she had.

"Hmm?" Ning Ning turned her head, her phone had suddenly rang, she reached out and picked up her phone which gave her a shock.

Her phone had a new app icon.

The icon was that of a red opera house, the name of it was...Life Theater.

Ning Ning stared at the icon for a very long time. Her finger lowered and retracted a few times, in the end she gritted her teeth and tapped on it.

After the loading screen, was a login screen.

Since she had already tapped once, tapping a second time wouldn't matter, Ning Ning tapped on the login button.

Three options appeared.

One: Audience Entrance.

Two: Stowaway Entrance.

Three: Owner Entrance.

Ning Ning tapped on the first option, login failed, she hesitated for a long time before she tapped on the second option, login failed again.

"I'm left with...owner?" Ning Ning furrowed her brows, her index finger slowly tapped on option three.

A crew member walked by behind her.

In the next second.

A group of patrons and masked people walked by behind her.

Ning Ning looked up absent-mindedly. She looked at her surroundings. She was standing in a big waiting hall, hanging above her head was a huge crystal lamp, it illuminated every corner brilliantly.

There were popcorn machines and crane games among others in the hall, the patrons who were waiting for the movie to start were

gathered here, they shopped and played around under the guidance of the masked people.

"The next screening is about to start. Patrons, please proceed to hall number one."

Ning Ning quickly looked back. People and masked people walked past her towards a hall that was laid with a red carpet.

"There are three stowaways, they're currently in the waiting hall. Would the doorman please proceed to arrest them immediately, then escort them to hall number two."

Three thug-looking people ran past Ning Ning hurriedly. "Get lost!" One of them reached out and gave her a shove, Ning Ning was pushed to the ground.

In the next second, countless swords of light caught up to them. The swords pierced their sleeves and pants, nailing the three of them to the wall. Although none of them were harmed, one of them pissed themselves, the other two wailed like ghosts and howled like wolves.

"I'll leave it to you guys." A lazy voice rang out behind Ning Ning, then there was the snap of a finger. "Do what you will to them as you please."

A group of masked people ran over excitedly. They grabbed the three stowaways and raised them over their heads—*huff, puff, huff, puff*—like sheep to be used for a bonfire party, they transported the stowaways off as they salivated.

"Let me down!"

"Who are you people?!"

"What the hell kind of place is this?!"

The three stowaways disappeared behind the door to hall number two as they wailed.

Ning Ning let a breath out, she slowly looked back. "What is...this place?"

"It's Life Theater." Shi Zhong Tang knelt down with a smile. "It's not that weird. Life Opera House turned into Life Theater, then turned from Life Theater into the Life Theater app—this fellow has always been evolving."

"Evolving? How is it evolving?" Ning Ning asked.

Shi Zhong Tang tilted his head, then bent his elbow in front of her,

signalling her to wrap her arms around it.

"Come, I'll tell you while we watch the movie." He sighed with a little bitterness. "We had finally met again, must we talk about this fellow?"

"...Then we'll talk about it next time." Ning Ning wrapped her arm around his, borrowing his strength to stand up as she used her other hand to wipe the tear from the corner of her eye. "We'll just go on a date today, alright?"

"...Sure," Shi Zhong Tang laughed gently, "I have been looking forward to this day."

Tonight, a new movie was screened in Life Theater.

On the LED board hanging above the entrance of the wall, the words rolled down and a new film title appeared.

Title: Life Theater

Author has something to say:

The box was split into four pieces all of those years back, the abilities of the owner was also split into four, meaning to say that there are at least three people who can challenge Ning Mei's stature.. But that is another story, I'm not going to go on about it this year! Writing the same genre consecutively makes me want to die! Let me write something else! Write a pure love!! Let me tell you, I have a hundred and eighty pure love plots in my hands, wait for me to pick the least scariest one from among them...

Translator also has something to say:

It's been a long a year and a half year ever since we've started this, I never thought it would take this long in the beginning to be honest. Come to think of it, our release of this series seemed to have coincided with COVID19, that's definitely a coincidence and has nothing to do with us... Jokes aside, I hope that our translation work made the pandemic more bearable. Unfortunately, I would like to go into hibernation for a while. I can't promise any future series as of now but I do owe our dear readers two extra chapters the author had written for this series. I don't have a timeframe for them yet, but I would really like to take my mind off translations for a while, so I apologise for that. For now I would like to thank the readers for reading our work and here's hoping for a pandemic free world soon!